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MARY FENWICK'S DAUGHTER

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THE AWAKENING OF MARY FENWICK.

ONE REASON WHY.

PART OF THE PROPERTY.

IN THE SUNTIME OF HER YOUTH.

MARY FENWICK'S DAUGHTER.

A MATTER OF SKILL.

FLOWER AND THORN.

BEQUEATHED.

SUNSET.

LONDON. HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED.

MARY FENWICK'S DAUGHTER

BY

BEATRICE WHITBY

AUTHOR OF

' THE AWAKENING OF MARY FENWICK,' "ONE REASON WHY,"
"IN THE SUNTIME OF HER YOUTH," ETC.

IN ONE VOLUME

LONDON :
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

PR

5788

W65m

1893

MARY FENWICK'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.—*Julius Cæsar.*

‘Glow-worms are not lanterns.’

CAPTAIN FENWICK had a weakness for the name Mary. Hackneyed it undoubtedly was, disfigured by abbreviations it might be, but, to his taste, the name was exceptionally desirable, and he said, ‘Call her Mary. Yes, of course, she must be called Mary,’ when his daughter was born.

Mrs. Fenwick was flattered by the decree for the name was hers, yet she foresaw that the presence of two Mary Fenwicks in one house would insure awkward complications of ‘which Mary?’ ‘what Mary?’ ‘old Mary’ and ‘young Mary’; she foresaw that a pair of Marys would turn the name to a conundrum: therefore, long after Miss Mary Fenwick could walk and talk, aye, even after she could run and read, that indiscriminating appellation Baby still clung to her, and was allowed to cling.

But when a governess arrived at Combe, and the nursery was promoted to school-room, a struggle was made by the household after an appropriate and yet distinctive name for the child.

The abbreviations of Mary were discussed.

'Molly?' No, there were so many milky-mother Mollys at the farm. 'May?' No, too flowery for a tomboy. 'Minny' rhymed to Ninny. 'Polly' was impossible. 'Maymy' ridiculous; if, as Mrs. Fenwick suggested, two Marys were too much of a good thing, then the little girl should be 'Baby' to the end of the chapter.

But Miss Fenwick had ideas of her own.

'Not baby,' she said, 'I've grown taller than palings. I won't be baby, but I'll be Bab, same as if I was called Barbara, like Bab at Burton.'

The speaker was an only child, an autocratic little lady whose decrees influenced, if they did not sway, the household. Bab she henceforth became, and at two-and-twenty she was Bab still.

The beauty or the ugliness of a name is, after all, merely a matter of association. People might be found in whose ears the yappy little name of Bab was music; in fact, there was a person at Combe, upon this very September afternoon, who owned to such a perverted taste. He, however, was writing letters somewhere out of sight when Miss Fenwick, accompanied by four friends of hers, made her way into her mother's morning-room.

This room was a sunny, comfortable corner of the house, and Mrs. Fenwick's special property. It was stamped with her individuality; her work and her knick-knacks, her books and flowers, her pictures and her presence made it sunny, fragrant, comfortable; with dust and dogs, with a long face and a grievance, the younger Mary Fenwick broke into this sanctuary.

Her four friends were on four legs, and followed at her heels. They were anxious themselves; they knew there was something wrong, for Bab slashed at her tweed skirt with a whip in a way which they neither

liked nor did they understand. She was not a capricious nor unreasonable mistress, she was good-humoured as a puppy; her hand which, within that ugly, rough-weather glove, held the whip was a just, impartial pater and beater.

She was never irritable, but dependable as one of themselves.

'Nothing puts Miss Fenwick out,' bragged Becket, in the servants'-hall.

'What should put her out?' the new housemaid murmured. 'Health and wealth, and no man nor master to say her nay.'

And yet, 'with health, wealth, and no man to say her nay,' it chanced that Miss Fenwick was put out. She banged into the morning-room, her straight eyebrows drawn to a frown, her hazel eyes serious, her lips closed tightly. Mrs. Fenwick, dressed for her daily drive, was writing at her table. She finished the sentence at which she was engaged, unalarmed by the invasion; then she looked at the dogs, and shook her head.

'Not in here, Bab,' she said. 'Not the whole pack of hounds in here. I don't mind Dan or Venom, but not the dachshunds. Turn out Jan and Fritz; I draw my line there.'

Mother and daughter were on capital terms, on easy terms of modern good-fellowship.

During Bab's lifetime there had been little to make a mother—as an adviser, guardian, as a mother, in fact—necessary to Miss Fenwick: she had felt no desire for shelter beneath a maternal wing. She could stand alone and unabashed in the 'light that beats on thrones.'

In the Devon home of the Fenwicks was her majesty's kingdom, her subjects were loyal and her reign was prosperous as that of Elizabeth. But to maiden queens perplexities arise; they are not held exempt from worry; the share of a throne is a coveted possession, and

wooters flock from far and wide with intentions serious and matrimonial.

'I'll turn them out in a minute, mother. I'm going myself, but I want to speak to you.' She dived into the pocket of her covert-coat, and drew forth therefrom a thick letter. 'There,' she said, 'there, it's from Stanhope Peel, and it is another one.'

At this moment the carriage, on its way from the stables, drove past the window and drew up at the front door. Mrs. Fenwick did not see it; she dropped her gloves on the floor, forgot the dogs, and took a step in the direction of her daughter.

'Not really, Bab? Not Mr. Peel? I am sorry.'

'It isn't my fault.'

The girl had frank, wide-open eyes, and a direct way of speaking: she was an uncomfortably plain speaker occasionally.

'No, no, not your fault: but it is so unfortunate.'

'Humph; he doesn't really care a straw about me.'

And Mrs. Fenwick believed her, though to prejudiced taste it seemed difficult not to care very considerably for Bab.

She stood holding her letter and frowning at it. She was fair to see, tall, straight as a poplar, and though dressed in severely masculine garb—with a great deal of collar and cuff, box cloth and tweed in different shades of drab about her, with an uncompromising hard little hat on her trim head—she managed, by dint of small features and a delicate skin, to look feminine in spite of all efforts to the contrary.

Bab was not specially interested in her appearance; so long as her muscles and sinews, nerves and eyes, wrists and shoulders were in condition, she left her useful garments to her tailor's taste. Neither was she addicted to grumbling; every one said she was a lucky young person and she believed it. She had plenty to do,

plenty to say, she had an excellent fortune in prospective. she was an only child, she lived in the country, and she knew that a country life was the one best worth living.

However, this letter of hers was a nuisance, and it must be answered; she had come to grumble and just for once she did grumble.

‘He doesn’t care a straw. I wish he’d have left it alone; it’s such a nuisance! I don’t know what to say.’

‘Poor Bab!’

‘It is so annoying.’

‘I should not be angry, Bab.’ Her mother did not speak with conviction, but uncertainly.

‘How can I help it? I am angry. Other women make friends and keep *friends*. I never have a friend. If a man comes to the house, and if we get on, if he likes me at all, there is always a crisis, a climax, and then—then he goes.’

‘A crisis, Bab?’

‘Yes,’ crackling her letter, ‘a crisis like this, a climax, a flare-up. Any other girl can see a lot of a friend without a crisis; they amuse themselves without climaxes; I can’t.’

‘I am very sorry.’

‘I’m not sorry, I’m irritated. You know and I know what it is. You see, I’m not extremely lovely, and yet I don’t believe Cleopatra or Semiramis, averaging the men they met, had more climaxes than I have. The Campbells enjoy themselves without climaxes, but as soon as a man is introduced to me he says to himself, “I should ‘do’ for his wife.” I am a good match; don’t shake your head, I’m an average sort of person, and a—*good match*.’

‘But you are not by any means a great *parti*, Bab.’

‘No, I’m not, so look at the pains a man will take for only a little money. I don’t wonder rich women don’t marry, they des——’

‘Bab, wait, listen. If people marry imprudently, if a man marries without enough money, it is a wretched outlook for both of them.’

‘Are *you* taking Mr. Peel’s side?’

‘I am taking no side; but,’ slowly, ‘but he is comparatively poor; he has no profession, he belongs to an old family; he must look forward.’

‘Am I to be the prop for his family tree?’

‘My dear, if you liked Mr. Peel, you might not object to being a prop.’

‘Why can’t men prop themselves and their old families with work instead of with wives? You are such a philanthropist, mother, you would be longing to prop all the poor things (and their tailors and their families) who suggested it. Mother,’ with a laugh, ‘you had money yourself, did men want props in your day?’

Mrs. Fenwick laughed too, but she reddened slightly at this sudden demand upon her memory.

‘The Fenwicks were the only family that wanted a prop in my time, only your father, Bab,—with him came my only climax.’

‘Then it’s possible to—to——’

‘Write your letter, post it and forget it.’

‘I won’t answer it to-day, he is an impostor, he deserves to wait; he says ridiculous things he doesn’t mean. I know that clever sister of his wrote it for him, he is stopping with her; she was so civil to me in London, so *this* is what it meant.’

Mrs. Fenwick sighed.

‘Don’t get suspicious, Bab, don’t think of it; what does it matter? It is only the way of the world, the outside world. There are,’ slipping her hand within her daughter’s arm, ‘plenty of people who don’t want props but who want you badly.’

Mrs. Fenwick pointed her free hand at herself by way of proving her assertion, while her eyes fell on a photo-

graph, which stood, large and conspicuous, framed in silver, upon the writing-table.

Miss Fenwick looked at the photograph too, looked and smiled at the well-known face, looked again and laughed a little, shaking herself free from her mother's hand.

'Jack is going to Burton with me,' she said, 'he will be waiting, I had better go.' She opened the door and, with the handle in her hand, turned round and faced Mrs. Fenwick; the dogs had jumped up and were bustling round her. 'Steady, dogs. Mother, the carriage is here, I must not keep you. I will worry Jack instead, he won't take Mr. Peel's side and talk of props.'

'Bab, let it alone. Write your letter, don't discuss it with—any one.'

Still Miss Fenwick stood with the handle of the open door in her hand, and stooping, patted her collie's head; —she spoke, thoughtfully,

'I'd forgotten Jack, of course he is a friend, a real friend who never, never worries. If I wanted to prop any one,' raising her voice argumentatively, 'I would prop Jack. If Jack suggested it, I would be his prop;' her voice was clear, audaciously clear, 'now, if Jack asked me to marry him, I'd do it, mother, like a shot.'

The door stood wide open. There was no modest faltering in this proclamation of Bab's, no hesitation, she was a bold orator, and in the doorway, near at hand, well within earshot, not a foot away, a man stood listening to her words. This man had many reasons for interest in these frank remarks, indeed he was, himself, the subject of her suggestion; he was Jack, Jack Holland, whom she would 'marry like a shot'; Jack Holland, who never worried; Jack Holland, the original of the framed photograph which stood upon the writing-table before her.

Doubtless the photograph was a good likeness of the young man, but then it represented a grave face with steady mouth and earnest eyes. At this moment the face in the doorway was neither calm nor quiet, it flushed, then paled, the mouth trembled, the eyes kindled. He was well in sight of Mrs. Fenwick, she watched him; the words were said and heard all in a moment, there was no time to hush, no time to stop the girl, who was smiling at her own suggestion, unconscious, amused—but Mr. Holland's heart, in its violently disordered state, did not throb with greater speed, nor more strongly than did her mother's.

'Don't stare, mother, I mean it. Come, dogs, we're off. Hush, Dan, be dumb. Sticks and stones, nothing cures a collie's tongue.'

She made a pass at the barking collie with her whip, missed him, and turning round upon the threshold faced the young man standing there. She looked at him, and understood at once that he had been impressed by her remarks about him, even to such careless eyes as hers there was a consciousness about his face which told the tale.

She was on such easy terms of good-fellowship with him, she was so sisterly a friend of his, that though she had the grace to blush yet she laughed too.

It was a joke, merely a joke to which he had had no possible business to listen, but then that had been her own fault, not his: she had had no right to shout those sort of questionable jokes into the hall; it was fortunate no one beside Jack had heard her.

He did not join in her laugh, he—he blocked her path; Bab looked quickly at her mother, and then she ceased smiling.

How quiet it seemed all at once, how stiff, how odd, how constrained, how uncomfortable.

This joke was about to turn into grim earnest. She

wished she had held her tongue, for it seemed to be the worst joke ever made, an awkward joke by which she would, perchance, lose a friend.

A joke with a climax, another climax, in its train as consequence, and the very last of her jokes upon the subject. For Jack was about to extract the humour from it and turn it into a purely serious affair. She knew Jack's face, she had been familiar with it from babyhood, she glanced at it questioningly.

He had taken her hand, whip and all, in his. He pulled her back into the room and shut the door behind her.

Here was a crisis indeed, and not by post this time. A sort of domestic crisis had broken suddenly as a bomb breaks about her head. Jack was always an impulsive man, he had startled her now, but she had known for some time that he could be desperately earnest about trifles.

'Bab,' he said, 'you know that I have been fond of you always. Did you mean what you said? Will you marry me?'

Not *tête-à-tête*, not bedecked and cautious, but plainly, openly, in a great hurry the climax came.

'Jack, Jack,' Mrs. Fenwick was aghast, she came to his side and put her hand upon his arm, 'this is ridiculous.'

Ridiculous was the wrong word; Jack did not answer it, he was watching Bab's face.

'Will you,' he repeated, 'will you marry me?'

'No, no, Jack;' it was the number three of the group who took upon herself to answer him; 'Bab was joking, she was talking at random. Would she have said *that* if she had meant it? Jack, be reasonable.'

It was curious to see that Miss Fenwick herself stood between these agitated people as though she had but very faint interest in the discussion. She had no strong likes or dislikes, but she was particularly adverse to a

scene or a fuss. She wished Jack would let her hand loose, she wondered why her mother was so vehement, and, on the whole, she thought Jack's question worth considering.

Why should she retract her words? She did mean them, unquestionably she meant them. Jack was her boon comrade, her oldest friend. She was not ill-pleased at the turn her affairs had taken, her mother's opposition, I am afraid, settled the question. The crisis was a somewhat abrupt one, but it should be the last.

'Mother, how rude you are! I don't mind. Why are you angry with him? I did mean it. I will marry him. Why not?'

'Bab, wait, think. Don't treat such a thing as this as though it meant nothing,—as though it would lead to nothing.'

'I don't know what's the matter with you, mother. You like Jack better than anybody else, and yet you don't want me to marry him.'

'Wait, Bab, only wait.'

'I'm twenty-two, mother; why should I wait?' Her cool, practical tones nipped the emotions of her hearers. 'Jack is one of us already. Stay with her, Jack; do tell her every one gets married. I—yes, I'm going. I've a letter to write.'

She backed out of the room. Away from Jack's protestations, away from her mother's tears, she was glad to get off; she felt a momentary awkwardness, she was afraid of more bombs, she would give the air time to clear. Jack and her mother would talk everything over and over, in and out, and then they would calm down; the former had lost his head, or he would have waited for his climax until Mrs. Fenwick had started for her drive.

It was a sudden conclusion, but Jack was a dear,—and she would write two lines to Stanhope Peel and tell

him of her engagement. Yes, she had let herself in for a serious engagement; she wanted a little time for reflection.

CHAPTER II.

My project may deceive me,
But my intents are fixed and will not leave me.
All's Well that Ends Well.

'He that leaves the highway for a short cut commonly goes about.'

MRS. FENWICK and Jack were left *tête-à-tête*. They were not accustomed to meet as antagonists; on the contrary, theirs was a deeply-rooted and close friendship such as is hard to sever.

This friendship of theirs was an old story, nearly as old as Mrs. Fenwick's wedding-day, for in the early time of her married life Jack had been her plaything, her solace, her delight.

In those far-away days, when she had come as a bride to her new home, life had not been all smooth sailing,—no, it had been hard, difficult, lonely. She had wanted companionship, unobservant guileless company in which to forget herself. Such company she had found at the rectory, where the rector's widowed daughter and her brace of children had made their home.

These two small people had welcomed the bride, they had brought their bubbling spirits, their warm hearts, their exacting demands to Combe; then and there Mrs. Fenwick had fallen in love with the little pair, and she was the sort of woman whose affection is not 'variable as the shade by the light quivering aspen made.'

When the clouds blew away from Combe, shadows had rested on the rectory, Jack's little sister, his comrade, Gill, fell ill. Through her illness Mrs. Fenwick had nursed her, till her death she had watched at her side;

more than Jack knew, or ever would know, she had risked in her devotion for the child;—but he knew enough to fix his heart to hers.

He knew what Mrs. Fenwick had been to him when his mother married, and he had found himself an alien amongst his new relations. His step-father, Lord Young, had sons and daughters who tolerated a step-mother as a useful person, a chaperon, a housekeeper, a companion for their father, but who resented Jack's introduction into the household.

Jack's mother was a practical woman, she had made a good match and she meant to be comfortable. She did not like Mrs. Fenwick, but she was glad that Mrs. Fenwick opened her doors to Jack; she was glad that he should spend his holidays at Combe; she was glad that he should be out of the way where his presence was a cause of vexations, rubs, and jars such as are the not infrequent result of contact between relations in the law. School-boys were odious to her, and when her son took the guise of a school-boy she had had no desire for his company.

It had been convenient to get rid of Jack at that time, but now circumstances had changed, Lady Young could not forgive her son his preference for Combe; she was jealous of the Fenwicks.

She had had no particular craving for him in his youth, she had not wanted him at all, but now she evinced a dog-in-the-manger tendency to snarl at those people who had found and appropriated a possession for which she had had no use. Filial love is no unexpected windfall which drops at a parent's foot, it is a sentiment which does not flourish unfed. It is the fruit of labour, of travail; uncultivated it withers away.

Jack Holland had been a rollicking small boy, troublesome and wild enough until his early experiences of loss and of loneliness had somewhat sobered him. From a

riotous madcap he had turned into a thoughtful school-boy, who had worked creditably at Winchester, who had, contrary to expectation, done well at Oxford, and who was now most zealous for work at the Bar. But the briefs were long a-coming, and term-time was hardly more profitable than those long vacations which he was in the habit of spending with the Fenwicks at Combe, those bitter-sweet vacations which plunged him deeper and ever deeper in love with that unsusceptible young Diana of the woods, Miss Mary Fenwick.

Mrs. Fenwick was truthful, but she was not given to speaking such truth as preys on the weakness of her friends; yet, as soon as the door closed behind her daughter she attacked her companion. He had walked over to the window; he did not wish her, she thought, to see his face.

‘You had no right to do that, Jack.’

‘It was the only thing to be done, Mrs. Fenwick. Any man on earth would have done it.’

‘Any sane man would not have done it. He would have been patient.’

‘I have been patient for years; I’m sick of being patient. What is the good of it? What good has it done me? Patience can’t last for ever. Could I stand there and hear her say that, and hold my tongue?’

‘You had no right to take advantage of what you overheard; you had no right to let her treat such a question as a joke.’

‘Who thinks of it as a joke?’

‘She does—of course she does. I know men have given up the old style, and are rough and ready when they woo, but they usually wait to ask these questions till they are alone with the woman they wish to make their wife. You took my breath away; I could not believe my ears.’

‘What did you expect me to do? Nothing, as usual? I was to listen and to laugh and to say nothing—as usual?’

‘She wasn’t in earnest, from first to last she was merely amused; she doesn’t understand what she has done. Jack, go after her, find her, tell her you were joking as she was joking, that you did not take her answer seriously.’

‘No, no, I won’t do that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Surely you know why? If she likes me well enough for this, I can teach her to like me well enough to give her answer in earnest. I have a chance to show her a better way of treating the question. I shall not get so near to her, and get no nearer.’

‘And if you fail—what then?’

‘Then I will do as you say; then I will go to her and tell her I was joking as she was joking. It shall be a joke to her, nothing but a joke.’

‘Precisely, that’s as I guessed; how like a man! You drag Bab into a false position, you make her talked about; a broken engagement is no credit to any woman. It is not like you, Jack, to think of no one but yourself.’

As an onlooker, Mrs. Fenwick had seen much of the disheartening game of the past; she had no sympathy with this venture, no encouragement for this impulsive suitor—she, who had seen much and who divined more, trembled for the future which she was doing her best to avert. ‘Justice is blind, and so is Cupid too,’ but a mother’s love does not dim her eyes. Mrs. Fenwick knew that Bab was not as Cupid painted her. She also knew the size of Jack’s great expectations, the demands he would make upon her daughter’s stores of feeling. She knew how much he would require, and how little he would get. It was true that Bab’s hands were strong, shapely, open, but they held nothing which Jack asked of them: they had no such stock-in-trade, they could not give what they had not got.

Alas! she foresaw rocks, shoals, quicksands ahead, for this daughter of hers was a spoilt child, and though Jack was content to live as a courtier under the thumb of a queen just now, yet he had plans, theories, standards of life which his love for Bab had revolutionized somewhat, but which in the sober state of matrimony would re-assert their dominion, and to them he would endeavour to fit his wife.

Poor Bab! Poor dear Bab!

Mrs. Fenwick had not intended to spoil her daughter, but Bab was a Fenwick, any little peculiarity of disposition that she had shown in her childhood had been excused upon that plea by her mother, to whom the Fenwick characteristics were sacred.

Captain Fenwick was no disciplinarian.

'Leave her alone, don't worry her,' he always said. 'She's quite good enough for me.'

The let-alone system answered, no snippets of carpets, no nails, no hammer, so to speak, were used for her training, and yet she grew and blossomed just as she should.

She did as she liked, but then she liked so agreeably; she had no perceptible temper, she did nothing outrageous, she wanted no curb. She led without domineering, she seemed ready to relinquish her rule if her neighbours wished her to do so.

She lived a healthy life, she hunted and shot, she fished and rode, she played tennis and golf, she danced and drove the years away. Perfectly happy, perfectly satisfied with her life, her surroundings, and herself, she found nothing to long for, and she longed, consequently, for nothing, except, perhaps, for more time in which to enjoy the manifold goods the gods bestowed.

Every one liked Bab; the men who came to Combe or to the neighbourhood of Combe specially liked her. So frank and friendly, so easy to please, so genial and so

keenly interested in their out-of-door interests was she. Lady Young was hard upon her, she said unkind things of her.

‘Miss Fenwick encouraged every one,’ she told Jack.

But the ‘every ones’ themselves knew better, they knew that Miss Fenwick’s friendliness was extreme, that it was more or less universal; they also knew that it led to a blank wall, and that beyond this barrier there was ‘no thoroughfare.’

‘She is a nice girl,’ they had whispered, in confession to their friends, ‘but as hard as nails.’

This characteristic of hers was not inherited, no Fenwick hitherto had been the untroubled owner of a whole and merry heart; no Fenwick hitherto could, with any truth, have been called ‘hard as nails.’ In a vague way Mr. Holland knew of the ‘no thoroughfare’ and the blank wall, but he was angry with Mrs. Fenwick, who had no reason to be so violently opposed to his plan; who had no justifiable reason for those tears which stood in her eyes as she spoke.

‘Do you expect me to wait for ever?’ he asked her, angry at her opposition, hurt by her tears. ‘You told me to wait. What good has it done? What good could it do?’

Then Mrs. Fenwick said a cruel thing,—she spoke of this overwhelming, unconquerable, this deep love of his as though it was lacquer on a bell, or veneer on a gas-bracket.

‘I believed, I hoped that in time it would wear off, that you would get over it.’

He repeated those words ‘get over it’ in a voice that went to the heart’s heart.

‘Yes, Jack, you think I am unkind, but love misplaced, unreturned, disappointed, doesn’t remain intact; if you don’t bury it, it turns sour, bitter, odious.’

He flushed, and setting his teeth remained silent;

then she laid her hand upon his arm, and was more gentle with him.

‘You two have no tastes in common, Jack, absolutely none. You are not a sporting-man, you love your books. Half your day you spend among them, you are interested in many things which to her would be dry as dust. Bab does not think at all, she is too active physically to be mentally active. She cares for her dogs and horses, her whole life is spent in such pleasures as you in your heart of hearts despise. She never reads, she has no sort of interest anywhere except down in the fields and woods, across country here at Combe. She comes in tired out at night, her home is a place in which to recruit her strength for the next day’s sport; a man is just a sharer of that sport, nothing more.’

‘Why do you talk of Bab like that? Do you think I want her to fall off like an over-ripe——’

‘Blackberry,’ interrupted she; ‘you know that when blackberries are ripe they do fall off, away from the brambles and prickles. You know they are not good to eat till they tumble at a shake. I am not blaming Bab for being as providence made her, but I am blaming *you*: leave Bab, let her go on as she is. You will expect too much. She will not understand you. I know you both so well, you will vex each other, it will be discord from first to last. If Bab should ever marry let it be with some one who cares less, who exacts less; not with a friend who cheats her into making a promise the meaning of which she does not fathom, the meaning of which she is not capable of fathoming. Bab doesn’t know what she has done.’

‘I have told you already that Bab shall not keep her promise unless she does understand what *it* means, and what *I* mean.’

‘And I have told you of the gossip, of the unplea-

santness, of the awkwardness of a broken engagement. Think what your mother will feel, think what my husband will say—think of Bab. Don't be obstinate, Jack. Trust me.'

'I think in such a case I will trust myself, and I do not believe our engagement,' he used that expression boldly, 'will be broken off. If you think it best we can keep it quiet for a time, it need not be announced. Perhaps under the circumstances it will be better not to announce it.'

'Far better.'

To share such a secret with Bab was a link to draw her nearer; it might be difficult to close her candid lips which were accustomed to tell everything to everybody, but the suggestion pleased Mr. Holland. It was difficult for his companion to go on as kill-joy, as wet-blanket, for she was fond of him, and his face touched her.

'You think I am cruel, Jack, but it is to be kind, I am afraid of consequences; no man in your state of mind thinks of consequences, but they come. If—if there *must* be this understanding between you let it be private, that the misunderstandings which follow may be private too.'

The building of air-castles and the dreaming of dreams want no foundations set, no commonplace, common-sense foundations; Mr. Holland heard the speaker's voice soften as she spoke, but he frowned at her words. Just then a sound of approaching steps was heard, voices and a laugh broke into this solemn conclave, the door opened, Bab and her father, preceded by the dogs, came into the room.

Captain Fenwick was not laughing; he came in alert, eager, interested, and caught Jack by the hand. As he did so his expression altered, his excitement waned, his congratulations faded on his lips, he had seen his wife's face. Captain Fenwick had boundless faith in the

compass by which he steered ; he looked again into his wife's face and then said interrogatively rather than with congratulation,

'What is this I hear, Jack ? Why haven't you come to me ? I'm the person to be consulted first. Bab has been telling me the most astounding thing.'

'Father said he was not at all surprised,' said Miss Fenwick. There was nothing conscious, nervous, nor exulted, nothing newly-betrothed in her way of talking. 'And he is very pleased.'

But Captain Fenwick was staring hard at his wife, who would not meet his eyes.

'Godfray, they—they haven't thought about it enough, indeed they have not.'

'My dear Mary, Jack was at her christening, that's twenty-two years ago and some odd months. There has been time to think it over. I know you are cautious, but thinking may be overdone ; I hardly understand.'

'Bab,' Mrs. Fenwick looked into her daughter's face, which sobered under those serious eyes, 'Bab has not thought it over, she hasn't been serious, she wasn't even in earnest.'

'I was, mother. What more can you say than "yes" or "no," if you have thought it over for years ? I said "yes."'

She looked from one to the other, wondering who could gainsay her statement. She hardly expected Jack to qualify her words.

'I know you meant it, Bab, but your mother is angry with me, she wants us to keep this—this understanding, this engagement of ours quiet till you rightly know what you have let yourself in for.'

'Wait,' said Mrs. Fenwick, 'wait a little. It is too sudden altogether ; wait till you understand each other. Wait till Christmas.'

'Mother talks as though we'd only just been intro-

duced, Jack; but,' amiably, 'of course I don't mind waiting. Mother, the horses are fidgiting, and Coachman is furious; you had better be off.'

As Captain Fenwick and his wife drove together they talked of little but their pair of lovers. Captain Fenwick was somewhat puzzled at his companion's attitude.

'She may be as unimpressionable as a golf-ball, but he knows all about her. Don't bother yourself, Mary, it will come all right in the end.'

'The end, Godfray, the end is such a long way off. I want it to be right in the beginning.'

'I thought you revelled in any sort of lover. I am very pleased about it; it is time she got married. Jack's a capital fellow, and they ought to know their own minds, they have been like brother and sister all their lives. Don't worry, wait till Christmas, then see how the land lies. Bab is my daughter, remember; she has inherited some of my failings, she is not like her contemplative, unapproachable mother. Leave her alone, Mary, leave her to nature and to Jack.'

CHAPTER III.

Direct not him whose way himself will chose,
'Tis breath thou lackest, and that breath wilt thou lose.

Richard III.

'Well may he stumble who chooses a stony way.'

THE drawing-room at Woodbury was all a drawing-room need be, it was pleasant to look at and cosy to sit in. The era of down cushions had swept it from end to end; soft, caressive, of divers hues and sundry sizes, upon the window-seats, upon sofas, divans, and chairs lay these last touches to the luxury of this luxurious age.

The owner of the room had no craze for picking up

the uncomfortable oddities of former generations. Lady Young never ransacked fusty old curiosity-shops for crazy cabinets, historic clocks, antediluvian chairs; she had no reverence for the antique in any form whatsoever. Old things and old people were best out of sight, and alas! she herself grew old. Long ago she had resigned herself to the loss of a waist, but it was hard to resign herself to the loss of youth; it was mortifying, dull, embittering to grow old and to lose comeliness. In the days of yore men had looked at her blue eyes and at her fresh cheeks, then they had told the world that,

‘Mrs. Holland was a sweet little woman.’

They looked now-a-days at her *pince-nez*, at her florid face and they said, ‘Lady Young is a dangerous woman.’

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Holland had not been sweet, nor was Lady Young absolutely dangerous. Of course she was a scandalous, mischievous person, but dangerous is a big word and there was nothing large about Lady Young; her tongue was petty, it did not concentrate its venom effectively, it wounded, but it wounded superficially. Neither nails nor teeth inflict deadly hurts, and yet no one relishes being scratched or bitten.

Few people in Devonshire relished Lady Young’s conversation which she drew from an imagination that was as capacious as her memory. This memory of hers was a rag-bag in which she stored raw-edged snippets, useless scraps, soiled tags, rags, and bob-tails of news concerning Lady Young’s neighbours and her neighbours’ neighbours. With her beauty Lady Young had achieved her title, her tongue achieved for her such distinction as, now-a-days, was hers. Happily an evil tongue is distinctive, it soon brands its owner, and is writ down as such.

If Lady Young was not popular she could find an ear when she wanted one, for she condescended much to men of low estate should her requirements elsewhere

fail her; if Lady Young's acquaintance did not believe in her she had a complete, comfortable faith in herself.

Lady Young's annual garden-party was to take place that afternoon at Woodbury. Both she and her step-daughter, Alethea, were arranging flowers upon a table spread with protecting newspapers in the drawing-room; they were busy over their portion of preparation for the entertainment.

Alethea's sisters were married, her brothers were out in the world, she was the only one of the Young brood left in the parent nest. Lady Young was aware that young birds are in no hurry to fly should the home of the fledglings be too cosy, so she had arranged her husband's nest with care, and the six young birds had flown.

Lord Young was getting old, he was not so strong as he had been. Alethea made herself useful, she had a taste for sick-nursing, she was welcome to remain at Woodbury.

'Providence was a wonderful manager,' Lady Young was wont to assure herself; it was her custom to trust in providence and 'to keep her powder dry.' 'Poor Ally was so delicate and so peevish that she had no fear of losing her, none at all.'

And Alethea's thirtieth year had passed and she was not 'lost.' She stood over her flowers, a small, pathetically thin woman, with soft, dun-coloured hair pulled off her temples away from her pale, bright eyes. She was fragile; she owned a lordly 'nonconformist conscience' which wore her out in the endeavour to live decently and in order with the step-mother with whom her lot was cast.

It was a small matter, but she fought great battles over it. In another world the names down for V.C. will be a surprise, perhaps, to most of us. We may

hear of great bloodless victories won over trivial affairs by puny, insignificant warriors.

It would have been impossible for Lady Young to live without her step-daughter, she was necessary at Woodbury, there was always some one to wound, always one small target at which Lady Young might aim her miserable array of petty shafts.

‘You waste time, Alethea, the morning’s gone while you blend and touch and fiddle-faddle your bouquets; people don’t look at them through a microscope. I like flowers *en masse*. All those cactus dahlias together in one vase, all the lilies in another, and so on.’

Alethea took up the dahlias, and began to manipulate them as had been suggested.

‘I can trace out the big, showy people, the quiet, little people, the dowdies, the vulgars, the fashionables, the artists, I can trace them all out, mamma, in their vases of flowers.’

‘Bird’s-eye and snap-jack, ragged robin and hemlock, pink geranium and maiden-hair fern, I can imagine the sort of flowers you like, Alethea. Tidy, ineffective, old maidish, conventional.’

The uniform quietness of the younger woman’s face was contradicted by a pair of flexile eyebrows; fine, dark, expressive eyebrows which twitched, contracted, arched, lowered, interpreting feelings which their owner had no wish to be interpreted.

Miss Young carried off her flaring parterre of cactus to a distant table, pausing a moment to look out of the window at the sunshine.

‘There is no month that compares with September,’ she said, ‘a fine day in September is a king of days. I like the sun when its monarchy is limited.’

‘What nonsense you talk. I put off our party till September because I did not want mine to be merely one amongst the dreary epidemic of garden-parties that are

given in July and August. I like to be the first or the last.'

'“ High diddle diddle,
The fool in the middle,”'

quoted Alethea, arranging some monster sunflowers in a vase a foot high; 'there is something cute in that nonsense rhyme, mamma. What can be impressive huddled down, hemmed in on both sides? Never be a fool in the *middle*. You are quite right.'

Lady Young seldom troubled herself to listen to conversation unless she could extract from it some treasure for her rag-bag, something about some one for her fusty old store of calumnies.

'In September every one is at home; of course the dew falls more, and the lawns are spongy and all the clothes are *passée*, but one can't get everything,' she went on. 'I won't have a tent, people have no conscience about devouring peaches in a tent; the house is a sort of restraint on their capacity. The Campbells eat as though they were children at one of their own school-feasts.'

'It is something for the poor things to do.'

'Do, Alethea, do? Tennis, cricket, golf, croquet—surely with those four games, and the contingent of men which I am always fortunate in getting at this house, there is plenty for any one to do. You determine it shall be dull, but then you find everything but the study of your health dull; you find all visits dull but the visits of Dr. Bedford.' Lady Young's top-heavy lilies were very tiresome, they were falling out of the bowl as soon as she stuck them in; it was no use losing her temper with them so she attacked her companion. 'Women who have no husband to worry them worry about their own ailments; it is an unwholesome indulgence. I said to Jack yesterday that you'd better not go to London in the spring, but to the Medical Congress. You'd enjoy

that, you'd brighten up over that ; a study of symptoms would amuse you.'

'Am I so impossible to amuse?'

'You needn't be cross ; you never understand a joke. Even Jack laughed, and he hasn't my sense of humour ; he is heavy like his poor, dear father.'

The lilies were in now—tight, taut, massive, gaudy. Lady Young sat down and drew breath ; her dressmaker had not resigned a struggle for curves and lines, and Lady Young's brocade gown was not only noisy and be-bugled but it was of pin-cushion fit.

'Flowers in one's garden are enough flowers for me,' she grumbled. 'They waste one's time ; they are always dead or dying, and wanting to be done. No wonder you like them, Alethea, they are such invalids.'

'Let Blair help you, mamma ; you are tired.'

'I can't afford to be tired. I have a thousand things on my mind. Your father is out ; if ever I do want him he is sure to be out. Last night he was too gouty to play me at backgammon, but he is never too ill to be out.'

Lord Young and his daughter were fond of one another. The father had made a mistake, a mistake such as is often made ; a long mistake such as spoils the happiness of a handful of persons. It is treason to own this mistake, it is folly to fret for it. It is a mistake for which consolation may not be proffered, a mistake over which open sympathy may not be bestowed.

The Youngs shut shutters and drew down blinds to hide the error of judgment of their chief, but the father and daughter knew what lay hidden in the dusk, and this mutual knowledge bound them together ; trouble binds as no cement can do.

Alethea's delicate hand was warm, its clasp was good to feel, and her tongue was discreet. Every soul may deplore the mistake made save he who made it, and it

takes pluck for a proud head and a proud old heart to face a curious and discerning world without betrayal, without wincing. Lord Young kept a good front, but his daughter knew what it cost him to do it, and he was glad that she should know.

‘Father has gone to Combe,’ she said, ‘hasn’t he?’

‘No, I prevented that. Eight miles off to-day? certainly not, and there is nothing to shoot when he gets there.’

‘Nothing to shoot, mamma?—there are any amount of birds. You know that Jack said so yesterday.’

‘Jack will say anything, he is infatuated. I have no patience with Jack. She doesn’t mean to marry him; he will find it out, and then he will remember what I have told him.’

Lady Young was much given to quoting her son, she found him useful to back an opinion, to point a moral; he gave authority for many tales of which he had not learned to dream. Sometimes he figured as a prodigal, sometimes as a Solon, sometimes as an Admirable Crichton, sometimes as a Simple Simon, but he was always, upon one point at least, a singularly deluded young man.

Alethea’s eyebrows contracted.

‘What have you told him? I don’t know what you mean.’

‘That is not true, you are not blind; you know as well as I know, as well as every one in the county knows of his mania for that girl.’

‘Unless you had opened all the eyes no one would have known. Jack never mentions her name. Of course, you make no secret of it, mamma, but neither he nor she are demonstrative.’

‘What further demonstration do you want? Does not my son spend every available moment away from his home? Is he not for ever at Combe?’

'It is habit; he loved Combe before Bab's day.'

'For the sake of contradicting me, Alethea, you would say anything. Does Jack go to see Mrs. Fenwick? do young men care for the society of an elderly prig?'

'Every one likes Mrs. Fenwick. I don't understand what you mean by prig.'

'I mean a self-sufficient, conceited, stand-off person.'

'I thought,' said Alethea, softly, but with direct maliciousness, such as she would presently repent, 'that "prig" was another name for superiority. I thought that if any one was a little better, a little wiser, with a somewhat higher standard than his neighbour, then he, or she, was what is called a "prig."'

In the pause which followed this remark, while Lady Young whetted her tongue, gathering energy for a retort, the sound of a voice familiar to the vexed ears in the drawing-room broke up the debate.

'Where is Lady Young, Blair?'

'Her ladyship is in the drawing-room, sir.'

'All right, I will go in.'

'Good gracious, Jack,' said his mother, as the speaker, following close upon his words, entered the room, 'you here? I did not expect you. How well you look!'

'I walked over,' he said, 'it's such a nice morning.'

'Any news?'

'None at all,' he was as pleasant and fresh as the breezy weather. His mother stared with her hard blue eyes at him.

'Then why are you not shooting at West Hill? Most inconsiderate of the Fenwicks to have a big shoot to-day and to ask Lord Young.'

'Only three guns,' said Mr. Holland, annexing a bit of scented verbena, which he put into his button-hole; 'not amazingly big. Captain Fenwick forgot all about this show of yours. What lovely flowers, Alethea!'

'Forgotten?' said Lady Young, sharply. 'Then they are not coming?'

'Of course they are coming, mother. Mrs. Fenwick remembered all right; she is bringing the Campbells.'

'The Campbells? Fanny Campbell takes a couple of her girls to everything; they will fill the carriage.'

'Yes, so Mrs. Fenwick said.'

'Then Bab isn't coming? I am not a huffy person, Jack, but I expect some little attention; under the circumstances, I think it is nothing more than my due.'

Lady Young was dabbing up some water with a handkerchief about which was nothing substantial but the coronet.

'Mamma, is poor Jack to be scolded about the people who get out of coming to a garden-party?'

'I don't know whether Bab means to come or no,' he said gravely, he did not like cross-examination. 'She said nothing about it. I,' thoughtfully, 'hardly saw her this morning; they started early.'

But he had seen her sufficiently long to have been chafed by some offensive words of hers which she had not troubled herself to explain away.

Jack saw little of Lady Young, but he treated her as a former generation considered a mother should be treated. His manner to her was punctiliously civil. He could not give much that was worth having from within, his feelings were not under control of his will, but his words and his ways were. Lady Young was his mother; he was sensitive, even tender about her because of this tie. He was an old-fashioned man.

Bab had no reason whatsoever to reverence Lady Young. That very morning, carelessly, without seeing that she trod dangerous ground, she had laughed—good-naturedly, it is true, but for all that she had laughed and jeered at Woodbury ways and Woodbury news. Jack had surprised and silenced her by a rebuke which

was short, abrupt, and which seemed more severe to the speaker than to the offender.

‘If you want to be smart about any one, Bab,’ he had said, ‘go further from home. I’ve a prejudice against hearing those sort of things said of my people.’

Bab had looked straight at the speaker for a moment and lifted her eyebrows. Then she had proceeded to change the subject. A few minutes later the cart had come round, into which she had mounted and driven off. Jack had seen her no more.

A fortnight had passed since he and she had come to that unsatisfactory understanding in the morning-room. Hitherto the misunderstandings following in its wake had not been serious; it takes two to even make a misunderstanding, and Bab had no power of creating such absurdities. She took no offence, she was frankness itself; but she never could understand anything but a plain word. Moods and broods, tiffs, suspicions, lovers’ miseries in general were absolutely incomprehensible to her.

Not so to him. His tramp to Woodbury had blown off his morning vapours, but they had been there and they had wanted blowing. His temper was no longer a well-governed possession, it rebelled against a steady control, the fire in his heart sent smoke into his head. He had gone into the garden and found Mrs. Fenwick, he had told her that he wanted exercise, that he would walk over to lunch at Woodbury, that he had a headache that morning.

That wise woman had asked no questions, expressed no surprise. She thought it would be ‘very nice’ to walk to Woodbury, she was certain Lady Young would be delighted to have him.

So he had gone. He was not naturally bad-tempered, it was easy to get in tune with a fresh autumn day. All sorts of dreams might be dreamt on such a morning

Turreted battlements of gloriously inhabited castles had risen up in the verdant vales through which he had tramped, but these fell flat as card-houses when he found himself at Woodbury.

His mother had not a good effect upon him, he was apt to leave her presence disgusted with himself, dissatisfied with most things, she rubbed him the wrong way as she rubbed the rest of the world, she had no knack to smooth with those soft fat hands that were sweet with crushed verbena.

'Is she going to marry that charming Mr. Peel, Jack?'

'I have not heard so.'

Why could not his mother leave the Fenwicks undiscussed? But many years ago he had left off using the word 'why' in connection with her; he would leave 'why' and 'wherefore' alone still.

'Then she has refused him, Jack? I saw that he was serious, he was so civil to Mrs. Fenwick.'

Jack said nothing, and he looked expressionless as one of the sunflowers. News could never be dragged from him; if he could hold his tongue his mother could not, she did not know the golden way of silence.

'I wonder what they expect for that girl? The property isn't good enough for a great match,' she said, sharply. 'Mrs. Fenwick is ambitious, a *parvenu* always soars like a sky-lark.'

'She was one of the Norfolk Mansers,' said Alethea. 'One of those Mansers at Podmore, where our great-grandfather was hung for sheep-stealing.'

'Alethea,' said Lady Young, addressing her son, 'would tell any falsehood, she would invent anything for the pleasure of contradicting me. Of course Mrs. Fenwick's mother was not a dependent, nor was her father a merchant in Brazil, nor did Godfray Fenwick marry her for her money. All these facts can be laid

aside at Alethea's suggestion. But most people in the county can remember the time when she did not lead her husband by the nose. As a bride, he neglected her grossly; she was dull as an oyster, with no manners and nothing to say for herself. She soon got him in training; she held the purse-strings, don't you see?'

This was not news to the hearers—nothing that concerned Combe and its inmates could be called news at Woodbury. Jack was grateful to Alethea for finishing her duties with the flowers at this moment. He was grateful to her for taking him off to superintend the marking of the newly-shorn tennis-courts. Alethea and he were friends, very good friends now; times had changed since the old days when Jack was an interloper at Woodbury, there was no cold shoulder turned to him there now-a-days. He walked about the gardens with her, talking and laughing and making himself as pleasant as a man can do whose mind is out with three guns on a breezy hill a dozen miles off at the least.

CHAPTER IV.

To climb steep hills requires slow pace at first.

Henry VIII.

'A fog cannot be dispelled by a fan.'

'Now, miss, you really must. My mistress told me last thing to see you started in good time. The squire has ordered the cart round in half-an-hour.'

'What a nuisance you are, Becket.'

Bab had but just come in from the West Hill shoot; she was not specially tired, but it was nearly four o'clock, and she did not care about dressing up and turning out; she was disinclined to disport herself at the fog-end of Lady Young's garden-party.

When she got home at this time of day, she liked to

sit in an easy-chair and think of nothing at all ; a long spell of exercise in the open air has a drowsy and lulling reaction. Bab wanted nothing save her tea and her chair, but there bustled into her bedroom this imperious and importunate Becket, with commands from headquarters such as her young lady might not ignore.

Becket was a great person in her way, which was as faithful and as domineering a way as such an old servant's way had a right to be. She had lived with Mrs. Fenwick in her girlhood ; from that period up to the present day she had, as an interested spectator, seen most of the ins and outs, of the ups and downs of life at Combe ; she was an important part of the establishment. In the nursery days Bab had bullied Becket, but now the tables had turned : Becket treated Bab as an erring, irresponsible child upon whom chiding and advice could not be wasted. She coaxed, threatened, bribed, and humoured her as she had done when Miss Fenwick was not too old to be spoilt by such treatment.

‘Now, Miss Bab, you are brambles and mud and mess all over, and sitting there won’t dress you. The squire told Bruce he’d drive the new mare to Woodbury. ’Twon’t do to be late, for, by the looks of her, she won’t like standing.’

To this bait Bab rose. She was interested ; the new mare was hers, and she had been but a week in the Combe stable. Mr. Peel had heard her fame, and had been ‘up the country’ to look at and finally to buy her, at a very long price, for her present owner. Bab was surprised that anybody could have parted with so beautiful, so intelligent, so perfect an animal. Brunette appeared to be all that she had been said to be, and what mare could be more ?

When Becket, diplomatic Becket, alluded to Brunette her young lady roused herself, wriggled out of her leather-faced, be-pocketed coat, took off her frieze cap,

and began with a steady click of thong to unlace her shooting-boots. Duty called her to Woodbury, no doubt duty would turn into pleasure when once she got there, but Jack's mother was rather a tiresome person, and garden-parties were parties, not entertainments.

Brunette would spin over to Woodbury with them in no time. Bab had a fair smattering of stable knowledge, but she preserved the taste of her sex for rattling over the shocking switch-back roads of her county at a pace which was extremely invigorating,—but only for the driver.

‘Dear me, what boots!’ said Becket. ‘What awful clumping boots, Miss Bab. Your feet might be as flat as a pond, they look it. Those nasty, foreign skins disfigure you; I’m the same way of thinking as Mr. Holland, home skins are good enough for any lady, glacy kid shoes and slim soles to show off such favours as you got from your mother. No foreigners, no porpoises and crocodiles for British feet.’

‘Will you send Rawle to me?’

‘Rawle’s busy in the work-room. I’ve come to wait on you.’

‘Then get me a tennis-dress. Not that,—no, not that.’

Becket was standing before the open wardrobe unhooking some smart full-dress gown from a peg. She took it to Bab’s side, shaking out the lace and ribbons tenderly.

‘Now, now, miss do you take this and wear it just to walk up and down the terrace and look your best. I like a young lady dressed up as bright and dainty as a flower. I like a garden in a young lady’s hat, and you—you want a white duck suit plain as a charity child’s, and a boy’s hat with a bit of cricket ribbon round it.’

‘Send Rawle to me.’

‘You haven’t worn this lovely daffodil dress but once,

Miss Bab, it will be out of fashion next year. And Mr. Jack——'

'Send Rawle to me.'

'If Mr. Jack saw the daffodil——'

'Send Rawle to me.'

Rawle was Miss Fenwick's own maid, whose place Becket loved to usurp. The latter was no longer young, and her duties were, intentionally, light; she chose to exceed them, leaving her orthodox precincts to fuss after Mary Fenwick, the younger, whom she fondly imagined to be a duplicate of her mother.

Half-a-score of years ago Becket had had such shocks, such surprises amongst her mistress's early matrimonial experiences, that now she was not to be either surprised or shocked. She knew what a furnace might rage beneath a chilly exterior; she knew the tricks of indifference which the class she served palmed off upon the world; and she knew what that sort of indifference was worth. She knew how finely a well-bred woman can act.

She was not deceived by Miss Bab's feigned unconcern in Mr. Holland, she understood that sort of insensibility, it was the counterpart of her mother's long ago. She understood Miss Bab's 'nonsense,' and intended her gratification by introducing Mr. Holland's name constantly into the conversation.

When for the fourth time Miss Fenwick repeated, 'Send Rawle to me,' Becket shrugged her well-covered shoulders, rehung the smart gown in the wardrobe from whence she brought out the tennis-dress in question, dropping it with a gesture of depreciation upon the bed.

'There, miss, and it's plain enough to suit a quaker, but some ladies have such confidence that they won't do anything extra to please.'

Miss Fenwick stood at the glass, not a hair on her head was out of place, but she was smoothing and

patting the masses of brown plaits with an anxious and careful hand such as gave Becket's accusations the lie; Bab was no slattern though she turned up her nose at such decorations as were forced upon her.

Her busy hands were strong and supple, tanned by weather, but well-shaped and slender; she wore no rings, she had been given no pledge to remind her that she was no longer entirely and legitimately free.

'Any way, you can't make yourself into more than a poor imitation of a gentleman, Miss Bab, at your best,' said Becket, returning to the charge as she slipped a plain, newly-washed, duck skirt over her mistress's head, fastening the loose waist-belt with another sigh. 'You don't shoot so true, nor ride so straight, nor walk so fast and far, nor hit them balls so hard as Mr. Jack, who is mostly for books and don't care much for what you wear yourself out trying to do like a man.'

'Wear myself out?'

Bab laughed out loud. She well might laugh. Worn out? There was no single trace of wear about her. She was fresh as a May day at four o'clock in the morning. Her beauty was chiefly the beauty of freshness, of absolute freshness and perfect health.

The west-country air had blown a colour, a bloom such as is the pride, the speciality of the Devon maidens, into her cheeks; her eyes glowed, her lips were fresh and ruddier than the cherry, in fact, her face was an absolute advertisement of the advantages of out-door life; she knew it was so, and she laughed scorn at Becket.

'Worn out, am I? Do I want patching, Becket? Keep your argument up: say yes. I know your programme, I know how you would like me to live. I must change my clothes four times a day, I must sit indoors eight hours a day in paper shoes and open-work stockings, doing fancy-work for bazaars. I

must plan food for the men, I must talk about maids and frocks. I may drive in the landau and I may drink chocolate. May I drink chocolate? you know I should not have any "nerves" for tea. No one, now-a-days, has sufficient nerve to drink tea.'

'You may laugh, miss, but I knew gentlemen's ways before your mother was married. You've got a hobby-horse, don't let it run away with you, pull it in; for there may be other hands on your reins, and you won't like that. If a young lady is going to be married it's best to make her husband into her hobby-horse; you can't have both, Miss Bab. Hobby-horses won't go in double harness, nor yet tandem. Oh, no, no, Miss Bab, you are never going in those hedging and ditching gloves? You are? Then take the bill-hook too, and be consistent.'

Miss Fenwick escaped, still laughing, from Becket; she was quite consistently clad, she said, without the bill-hook.

'My love in her attire does show her wit,'

was a line which was applicable to her but, oddly, Jack had never quoted it; indeed, he sometimes seemed to hanker after the vanities of clothing much as Becket hankered.

Captain Fenwick was not more grateful for Woodbury hospitality than was his daughter. Garden-parties were an insipid form of dissipation, but his wife had explained to him that it was impossible, under the circumstances, to get out of this particular *fête*. Lady Young was easily offended. She had a tongue; people with 'tongues' get nicely treated. She had a son—it was his existence which Mary emphasized; it behoved Captain Fenwick to do the civil at Woodbury.

Of course Mary was right, but her husband had a martyr-like air about him as he awaited Bab; for once

in her life she was late, and the mare was on her hind legs at the front door.

‘Hurry up, Bab,’ he said, turning to meet his daughter. The wear and tear of fifty years had left their inevitable trace on his kind face, but he was still spruce and soldierly, and his heart was as warm as it had been in those bygone times when no Bab existed for whom it was necessary to wait. ‘Hurry up, your mare has been on her hind legs for ten minutes. I don’t much like the look of her; I’m tired, and she wants driving. No, Bab, I’m going to drive; I don’t believe she’s fit for you to tool about the country alone.’

Miss Fenwick said, magnificently, that ‘Any child could drive Brunette; but,’ breaking off as she dodged into the cart while the docile steed danced upon the drive, ‘of course she was a little fresh that afternoon.’

She was indeed, and the freshness did not cease to be aggressive.

‘It would take a precocious child to drive this mare, Bab,’ said Captain Fenwick, dryly. ‘She hasn’t given me much time for reflection, and here we are.’

They were flying up the drive to Woodbury. Brunette had shied at gates, capered past carts, bolted when a gang of larks had risen from behind a hedge, and was just now treating bit and bridle with disdain as she took her cargo along at her own pace.

‘She has got something in her.’

‘She has. A temper and a taste for excitement. She’s missed no chance of fun on her way. I like something less lively between the shafts, Bab.’

‘You are lazy, father.’

Bab was not to be put out of conceit with her possession. When she alighted from the cart she stroked Brunette’s satin neck affectionately before she followed her father through the house, and on into the heart of the garden-party.

‘How late you are!’ said their hostess, meeting them with that uncomfortable high, fin-like greeting of finger and elbow called shaking hands.

Explanations, smiles, apologies followed; then Lord Young walked Captain Fenwick off with him, and Bab was engulfed by friends.

Miss Fenwick was a favourite of Fortune. She knew nothing of cold shoulders, of slights, of social wounds. Her acquaintances were, for the most part, ready to be her friends: any advance of hers was met three parts of the way, any remark of hers was listened to as though it was of consummate interest.

At home and abroad alike Queen Bab reigned with an easy, unconscious sovereignty. Some girls were a little afraid of her. Those shy girls who were not the favourites of Fortune, who were used to be ignored, to being talked down, to wallflowering at balls, to isolation at tea-parties; those girls who, conscious of their home-made frocks, and of their blushes, tried not to know that they were social failures, making believe that the agony they endured was pleasure; those girls, whose martyrdom was without hope of reward, wondered why men and women huddled one another, like sheep, along a beaten track after Bab Fenwick who cared nothing for nobody,—at least, very little for anybody.

Jack Holland was not one of the following flock that day; he watched his sovereign, but from a distance. Alethea Young and he had sneaked off to a warm corner of the drawing-room; she was tired out and he was lazy, so, both of one mind, they sat in the south window. In an unintrusive, warbling way Alethea was a great talker, and Jack listened to her while his eyes followed the active, white figure which was here, there, and everywhere amongst the crowd; a group of appreciative acquaintance always hovered about Queen Bab whichever way she turned.

Her white, duck suit, her sailor-hat, looked plain enough amongst the gala gowns of the womenkind, who had seized the last chance of airing summer smartnesses no matter how chilly the afternoon should prove. Every girl hoped that her nose looked less pink than her neighbour's, and steadily refused a wrap; for what woman feels the cold when clad in her best gown, or the heat if she is wearing her new coat?

Jack was pretty well inured to a latent soreness of heart. The soreness that day was more active than usual; it kept him where he was even after there was no special figure to watch, even after his white star had set down the rhododendron glade in company with a pair of black stars from the barracks.

The crowd upon the lawn was thinning, the roll of departing carriages had begun, people came strolling up from afar off in couples, shivering dowagers paced the gravel walks to keep warm, the sun had set, and still Jack sat on in the window, while Alethea talked.

It was not easy to decide which of the pair was most startled and surprised when Miss Fenwick herself came round the sheltering screen behind them and joined them.

'Why did you appropriate Jack, Ally? I have been hunting for him for an hour; I have been disturbing game in all directions; the happy couples have hated me. You lazy, unsociable people, you have been shirking.'

As she spoke, she seated herself at Jack's elbow on the couch as though she had settled down there for some time, as though she had never disparaged her hostess, nor turned a shoulder on a rebuke; and Jack became aware that he had been sulking, that he deserved to be shot for his ill-humour for which he would hasten to atone.

Bab had no idea that she had been out of favour, so the benefit of forgiveness could not be appreciated.

'We did our duty for two hours,' said Alethea, 'and I got hoarse and Jack got bored, so we made a party of discontent and bleated in this cosy corner.'

'Don't go, Alethea.'

'But I must. I ought to have gone long ago. Look at that little maiden all forlorn pretending to be interested in begonias; I shall go and talk to her, and show her how nice a garden-party can be.'

As Alethea rose and the down-cushion, against which she had been leaning, rolled upon the floor, Jack offered it to the new-comer; her shoulders wanted no cushion. She was such a restless person that Jack could never bribe her to remain beside him for ten consecutive minutes. She was a lady of quicksilver, quicksilver at large.

'Jack,' she asked, picking a morsel of thread off his coat-sleeve, which offended her punctiliously neat taste, 'how are you going back?'

'Bedford will give me a lift.'

'Let him drive father instead. I want you to come with me.'

Her sunny face was turned to his, her lips curved to a wide smile. He had known 'other women fair as she,' but other women had quibs and cranks and wanton wiles, other women were small and mean in many ways, other women tried to please, they meant and manœuvred to please; but Bab was spontaneously pleasant, she was incapable of the smallest insincerity.

Occasionally this incapacity of hers had not, to Mr. Holland's mind, seemed altogether admirable, but now——

'With me,' he repeated, gently; then she quenched the light of his eyes.

'I want to drive Brunette,' she explained, 'and father thinks I can drive nothing but one of his old sheep. If he will go back with Dr. Bedford, that will make it all right.'

Entirely frank, absolutely straight, and yet—and yet he no longer looked at her radiant face, but he watched a dowdy wren which supped on the seeding face of a sunflower outside the window, and he did not speak.

‘It is getting late, Jack; I have ordered the cart. Let father know, and we might start now.’

Her companion was in a brown study, the sort of study which was even more tedious than its fellows. She got up.

‘If you let father know, Jack,’ she repeated, ‘we might start now.’

‘I don’t think we can start at all. It won’t do; you don’t drive about the country alone with me, or with any other man who happens to be staying at Combe.’

‘I drove to Burton with you last week.’

‘In the cart with Jim at the back, not in the T-cart with no one.’

‘What’s the difference? Is a groom a chaperon? With whom should I drive if not with you? I thought—’ she looked puzzled and a little annoyed, ‘you would have liked the idea.’

‘People do not know even the little there is to know about us. I think they should not have occasion to talk,’ pedantically; ‘I don’t wish a word to be said.’

‘You need not charge me as if I were a jury; you won’t convince me of anything preposterous. Don’t be so dreadfully proper, don’t be so ridiculously strait-laced; let me drive you home.’

But Jack would not take his orders like the rest of the world, he had clear opinions on most points, and Bab had not gone the right way to work to confuse them. If a man is irritated he is sure to be obstinate. Tact is the predominating feminine characteristic; tact has survived as the fittest quality with which to govern the governing sex. In theory a frank and guileless

woman is much admired, but it is the woman of resource, of nod and beck and wreathed smile, of wanton wile, of infinite tact who secures the full appreciation of men. Truth is seldom comfortable enough for ears that are beyond and above all things careful for their comfort.

It was not by any means disgracefully late that night when Mrs. Fenwick came into her daughter's room, but Bab was half-asleep in her chair while Rawle pigtailed her hair. The beautiful hair which had been 'groomed' (in its owner's phraseology) until it was as sleek and smooth as Brunette's glossy coat of brown.

Mrs. Fenwick did not return her daughter's sleepy smile of welcome; then Bab shook herself upright, at the same time shaking the half-completed pigtail from her maid's hands.

'Rawle, you may go, I shan't want you again. Sit down, mother, sit down, that chair is very comfortable.'

But Mrs. Fenwick did not sit down, she fidgeted with the silver, the gleaming silver necessities and un-necessaries of the toilette, which strewed the table.

'You have been talking me over with father, he did not like being squeezed into the landau with the Campbells. He did not like my driving Brunette home with Major Elton; he was very huffy about it.'

'How could you drive home alone with Major Elton? You hardly know him.'

Bab was plaiting rapidly at the pigtail, she gave a sigh which was three parts yawn.

'I drove home with him because Jack wouldn't come. When Jack lays down the law it annoys me; he is too fond of his own way, mother; but I am sorry you had to squeeze father in amongst you. I thought Jack would walk.'

'Bab, you don't treat Jack as——'

'As what? I'm always in hot water now. You

needn't be afraid, I made it all right with him after dinner. I told him exactly why I did it; he was not angry, he saw reason.'

'Did he? Did he see reason later on when he sang to us? No one sings as he sings. I could not speak to thank him, and you, Bab, you were *asleep*, he saw you were asleep. I was sorry, I was ashamed to see that you *could* sleep.'

'One can generally sleep when one's tired, I've been out in the air all day. I didn't know I was going to sleep, one never knows;' she was apologetic. 'I like Jack's singing.'

'Then if you like it, listen to it.' With maternal pride Mrs. Fenwick lifted her daughter's prodigious pig-tail; it was hard and heavy, she let it fall again. 'And if you like him, Bab, don't ride rough-shod over his feelings. I am going, you need swallow no more yawns, but—but I want you to think; think what a power you have to hurt any one who is fond of you; think how a simple thing can please him, just the simplest thing. The giant's strength is excellent, you have it, I can't bear to see you use it as a giant.'

Bab looked thoughtful, she received her mother's good-night kiss absently.

'It would be a good thing to be married soon,' she said, 'Jack won't be ridiculous then. Good-night, mother.'

Mrs. Fenwick was not satisfied, she had done no sort of good, she had not been sufficiently stern.

Evil things do not budge for coaxing, she knew; they want a sharp onslaught, they want driving, not leading forth. Providence does not coax sinners to saintliness, the power that coaxes is not from above.

But then there was no downright sinner in the green and white chamber, the sleepy pigtailed head there slept the sleep of the righteous.

The post of onlooker, the thankless, anxious post was Mrs. Fenwick's; she had better return thither, playing at providence would avail her nothing.

CHAPTER V.

I pray thee sort thy heart to patience.—*Henry VI.*

'He who would eat the kernel must not complain of cracking
the nut.'

THE heavy rectory gate swung behind Mrs. Fenwick, swinging smoothly, closing gently as though that special incomer actually, as well as figuratively, anointed the rusty hinges which she passed upon her way with oiled feathers.

Mrs. Fenwick was one of those people who know the blessed effect of oiled feathers, and who make use of that knowledge. She was a happy woman, she did not shut herself up with her happiness, jealously defending the sunshine of her life against such shadows as the mere knowledge of her less fortunate neighbours' aches and pains, wants and griefs might cast across it. No, she went out voluntarily into the shadows and tried, with the light of her sunshine, to make dark places bright.

The sort of happiness which had come to her was wholesome, it agreed with her. It had developed a proud, reserved, high-minded but passionate girl into a strong, yet gentle woman. She had

'The great, deep heart which is a home for all,
Just, eloquent, and strong
In protest against wrong,
Wide charity that knows no sin, no fall.'

She was not an officious person, she was no platform orator, no organizer, she merely fulfilled the old adage of her people, '*Doe ye nexte thinge.*' It seems a simple

law to follow, in reality it is not so easy as it sounds, but she followed it. She did 'ye nexte thinge,' she did it kindly, and because a little kindliness reaps a reward, because bread thrown upon the waters comes back buttered, because charity is beloved of gods and men so was Mrs. Fenwick beloved. Life was hard enough within those flowery cottages in the little Devonshire hamlet beyond the gates of Combe: it is not only beneath the gas-lamps that mankind sins and suffers, London has not the monopoly of want, of suffering, of pain. Where every prospect pleases man remains vile and he remains struggling, sometimes for a livelihood, sometimes for health, but usually for something which he wants and cannot get.

'Ye nexte thinge' which Mrs. Fenwick did was to give sympathy first and help behind it. She gave of both to every Jack and Gill, to every Darby and Joan, every sinner and every saint within her ken. Her help was not all drawn from her pocket—a great deal came from that comfortable source—but her tongue, which was a gentle hopeful member, and her ear, which was a patient, interested listener, were her allies. She was in truth a Lady Bountiful of mind and heart, of time and head, of pocket and of peace, and she gave of her bounty with open hand.

Captain Fenwick laughed at his wife, who was said to keep a soup-kitchen, a registry-office, a dispensary and a confessional at Combe, but his laughter was not unpleasant in Mary's ears.

Bab laughed too. When she thought about it she wondered how her mother found time to plunge into all the household affairs of the valley; she, herself, could hardly cram into one short day her multitudinous engagements. After all, her mother did small good. Bill Olridge continued to beat Mrs. Bill, Tom Carnall continued to get drunk on cider and to ill-treat his

motherless children, Nellie Pike continued her evil course, rheumatics devastated far and near for all Mrs. Fenwick could say or do.

Where so little could be done it hardly seemed worth while to do anything, though Bab thought it was very nice of her mother to try to Arcadianize the district. Everything her mother said or did was *nice*. Bab left to her the monopoly of such *niceties*.

Some day, some day when she was a prop in good earnest, Bab would begin to interest herself in those dreary necessities of existence, 'the poor who were to be always with her.'

Mrs. Fenwick was on her way to the rectory to attend a committee-meeting, for the neighbourhood was palpitating just then over the near approach of a bazaar.

A bazaar in the country is no stale, unprofitable part of the quarterly round, half-duty, half-dissipation. It is a stirring event, a landmark in the pass of time, and it is also what all bazaars must be—a foundation of feuds and friendships, an enterprise which excites passions of emulation, of ambition, of envy. The best friends fight and the bitterest enemies are reconciled over the pin-cushions, and the live-stock stall and the *tableaux vivants*.

The community here in Devonshire were, oddly enough, interested in the object of the bazaar; there were people who intended to sell and the other people who intended to buy, there were no experienced Philistines in this unsophisticated region who would dream of taking a parcel, an empty purse and a cheap day's amusement in the Tipton Town-hall next week.

The Tipton bazaar was to overflow with attraction, it was to be fancy-dress. Humanity is, as every one knows, immensely allured by the charm of fancy-dress. How interesting, how novel, how arresting, how becoming it may be. How well the Lady Mayoress looks as

Mary Stuart. How realistic are the wigs of the Cavaliers.

But the committee had curtailed any flight of individual fancy at Tipton, the stall-holders were one and all to be dressed as gipsies, the stalls were to represent gipsy-tents; in fact, the bazaar itself was to be as like a genuine gipsy encampment as the gipsies and the local work-people could contrive to make it.

Two locked rooms at Combe bristled with paper parcels, the fancy stock-in-trade of the Fenwick stall. A fantasy in scarlet, gold, and white, jangling with sequins, hung in Miss Fenwick's wardrobe.

She had looked at it doubtfully that very morning.

'Is this really what an Italian gipsy would wear?' she had inquired of Becket.

'It is copied exactly from the book, miss.'

'How thin it is, and what extravagant women Italian gipsies must be.'

'Try it on, miss.'

When she had done as she was told to do and donned the fantasy, when she had tied the gorgeous kerchief over her hair and beheld she was very fair, Bab had grumbled no more.

'It is rather pretty, but it is messy; all these strings, and scarves, and sequins go the wrong way. Take it off, Becket.'

She was an odd young lady who preferred a coat and waistcoat, a shirt and tie to any soft decoration; she never made the best, she only made a man of herself, and so Becket told her.

As Mrs. Fenwick turned into the drive she rose a covey of boys who bolted across the gravel path, making for the shrubbery; but when these young gentlemen saw who the intruder was they turned them about and came to meet her.

She was appreciated at the rectory. Mrs. Campbell,

the rectoress, liked her; she had been a sympathizer with that lady's seven annual trials in the past: those trials had now developed into a family which overflowed their father's purse and had made havoc with their mother's health. A squireess who was pleased to put her hand in her pocket, a squireess whose carriage was almost rectory property, and who was willing to chaperon the girls was sure to be appreciated.

The boys liked her, she never saw ink on collars, holes in trouser-knees. Even green smudges from tree-climbing, whitewash off out-houses and dirt of any sort had no horror for her, she did not preach to wash, to brush, to reflect.

When the three boys came to meet her, Mrs. Fenwick knew that they came with a purpose, for through her their petitions reached her husband's ears, and the trio always wanted special '*leave*' to enjoy themselves on Combe ground in some way at which farmers and keepers alike rebelled.

'How do you do, boys? What has happened to you, Lance? Have you hurt yourself?'

'They are burning struel in the orchard, I got smoked roasting potatoes,' rubbing his grimy face with a grimy hand. 'I say, Mrs. Fenwick, we *are* going to the warren, Saturday, after the rabbits. Do you think Captain Fenwick would mind just lending us that old gun, the muzzle-loader on the bottom rack? We have only got father's, and there are no end of rabbits.'

The Campbells were day-boys at a school in Tipton, they had ample opportunity for testing their squire's power of endurance, through Mrs. Fenwick they achieved many treats; asking in her case did not mean the short '*Certainly not*,' which was so familiar in their ears. But now she shook her head.

'I asked him before, and I told you he said "no"; he quoted the epitaph,

“ Boy, gun,
Great fun ;
Gun bust,
Boy dust.”

He only keeps that muzzle-loader for sentiment, he says, not for murder.’

‘ It’s doing nothing.’

‘ That is better than doing too much, Lance.’

The boys looked glum.

‘ And I—I say, about Beacon Point, did you ask him ?’

‘ They are going before long, he will take one of you, not more, and try to fit it in with your *exeat*.’

‘ Thanks awfully.’

A tapping upon a window-pane of the drawing-room, where a beckoning hand, a large face and a small bonnet appeared, broke up the interview.

‘ That’s Lady Young,’ said the eldest boy, ‘ there are an awful lot of people come to jaw about the bazaar. Bab came a long time ago, the Adams brought her.’

This was wonderful hearing, Bab here? Mrs. Fenwick hurried on, hurried into an atmosphere of tea-cake, of coffee, of hot sealskins and excitement; a dozen women accosted her, but not with ‘ how-de-do.’ No one pretended to care for the health of her neighbour.

‘ Now, Mrs. Fenwick, I am sure *you* will agree with me. Lady Young wishes tea to be charged at a shilling. Is it not a preposterous price? You know as well as I know, and the public also knows the price of tea.’

‘ Dear me,’ said pacific Mrs. Campbell, ‘ I can remember paying a shilling for a cup of tea in London,—such flavourless tea, too.’

‘ No doubt, Fanny, you can go further back still and remember when tea was made in dishes and cost a fortune. Ancient history,’ Lady Young’s laugh annoyed her antagonist, Mrs. Adams, who flushed very

red, 'has nothing to do with the case. As I have undertaken the refreshment stall with Mrs. Adams' help, I think I may be allowed to speak. Is it reasonable to expect me to make money if tea is sixpence a head? Sixpence a head! and it is proposed that people should eat what they wish for that sum.'

'Eat what they wish *in reason*, Lady Young. I have sold at many bazaars. I have sold in London and in Leamington: we made money at our stall, and we made it at sixpence.'

'London, Leamington—what have they to do with us? The sort of people we shall have at this bazaar come to stay, and they come hungry; they *sustain* themselves upon their tea. Eat what they *like*! they may like to eat everything.'

'Cakes, scones, biscuits, bread-and-butter, *patissierie* of all sorts will be provided. It would be physically impossible to eat everything.'

'If we want to feed the neighbourhood let us, by all means, invite them to a meal; but if we wish to benefit the Cottage Hospital, let us employ the right means of doing so.'

'A shilling is a prohibitive price,' Mrs. Adams' voice quavered, 'which will give the stall a bad name. My fowls will not sell unless people are attracted to the refreshments by a reasonable tea. I get my fowls at three and sixpence a couple from Ireland. I propose to sell them at ten shillings. Consider the profit they will bring us.'

'The moral deterioration of the stall-holder is the most expensive part of a bazaar,' Alethea Young whispered to Bab under cover of the dispute.

Bab was not listening to the tea-riot, the four Miss Campbells were sitting round her talking of their charitable speciality, waxworks; giggling and babbling with the insipid, frolicsome gaiety of youth.

Bab had a good-natured but, to some minds, provoking way of liking everybody: she liked a very little, so that the little was easy to like.

Muriel, Dorothy, Phyllis, and Audrey (this name-cycle had swept through Combe Rectory on its triumphant march north, south, east, and west) were nice girls, she thought; they talked much of clothes and curates, and they laughed even more than they talked. She placidly tolerated the subjects which were not to her taste interesting, and the laughter she bore with even when she did not see its point.

'At any rate, Ally,' said Bab, 'waxworks are not an imposture. Every one who goes to the show knows precisely what he will get for his money. Mrs. Jarley and her man John, and the dusting, and the winding-up, and the jokes.'

'No, Miss Wilson,' Lady Young's voice was shrill with feeling, 'if bread-and-butter is made an extra who will undertake to count the pieces?'

'Oh, Bab, do you think waxworks are played out?' said the embryo Mrs. Jarley, a good deal worried. 'They're rather old.'

'The world is old,' said Alethea, 'but it doesn't seem played out.'

Poor Mrs. Jarley wanted a bolster for her mind, not an evasive generality; she knew that Bab would speak the truth, however uncomfortable to the ear it might be. Again she appealed to her.

'Do you think waxworks are too old, Bab?'

'They are about as fresh as anything, Muriel. Jack was glad they were chosen. Theatricals and tableaux, he said, had to be taken seriously, and serious amateurs were a serious nuisance.'

This was a bolster, though a hard one. Mrs. Jarley smiled again.

'Why isn't Mr. Holland here?' asked Phyllis. 'He

promised to draw up our programme for us, and write the amusing things for Mrs. Jarley.'

The question touched a forgotten circumstance in Bab's memory ; she opened her eyes wide, stared at the ceiling interrogatively, bit her lip, and then drew a sharp breath.

'That's my fault,' she said ; 'how stupid of me. I forgot all about it. He is waiting for me at the Hanleys.'

'Why at the Hanleys?' asked Alethea, speaking less gently than usual.

'We arranged to golf there, you see, but I was cubbing this morning, and Mrs. Adams was out. I went back with her to lunch, and she was coming to this committee-meeting so I came too, and until this moment I forgot Jack.'

The four Miss Campbells giggled, then they looked intelligently at Miss Young and giggled again. Alethea was not responsive, she seemed to be listening to the bread-and-butter riot.

'A shilling or sixpence, scissors or knives?' she said, joining in the discussion. 'You'll have to settle the question by arbitration, not argument, Mrs. Adams ; you don't know mamma, she is not to be convinced.'

But the question had not been decided either by argument or arbitration when the lateness of the hour impelled the heated committee to disperse.

Mrs. Fenwick and her daughter were wending their homeward way on foot, they picked their way through the rough village street and up the hill to the lodge gates ; it was dark. Bab had been complaining of her treacherous memory, she had been explaining the trick which it had played upon her that afternoon. Her mother did not reassure her, she was stiff ; unjust though it was, she was severe.

'Mother, I left a message for Jack this morning to

meet me at the links. I did it because you said those things to me last night.'

'A promising start, Bab, but a bad finish.'

'How could I help it?'

Mrs. Fenwick said nothing, her daughter kicked a stone aside.

'As Solomon said in his song, mother, "I am sick of love."'

'You know nothing about it, Bab, nothing but the word. You may be sick of Jack, that is quite another story.'

Though Mrs. Fenwick was not joking, Bab only laughed. By this time they had reached the gate, the man at the lodge was standing at his door and greeted them, as they had already been greeted a score of times, with,

'Güd evenen, mum, nice evenen's evenen.'

'Very nice evening, but a wet sunset. Has the cart come back yet, Basten?'

'I aren't zeed un, miss; but I ef only cüm'd in 'ouze thease minit. Liza,' addressing Mrs. Basten in the background, 'ef our dugcart pass'd up tü gert 'ouze?'

'Noa, 'er idden; and, Bill, düee plaize tü ax missis ef 'er'll cüm in 'ouze and lük tü thur babby, 'er bain't 'erzel s'evenen.'

'Poor baby ill again, Basten? I am sorry.'

'Us dü 'ope 'er idden agwaine tü 'ave vits agin, mum, but 'er's wuss than iver 'er wuz avore wee a cauld. An' 'er's a-zot 'erzel agin 'er phuzzick——' he broke off and listened, the sound of wheels were audible. 'I kin yer'n, miss; that thir's thur dugcart zhure 'nough.'

Basten opened the gate, the lights of the cart came skimming up the hill. Bab stood in the centre of the drive, holding up her hands to stop its passage.

'Pull up, Jack, pull up. We are here, we want a lift.'

In the dusky light the young man saw his guard of honour by the gate, and drew up beside them.

‘Who wants a lift?’ he asked, ‘both of you? There is no back seat, but get in, I’ll walk up.’

‘No, Jack, you take Bab, I would rather walk off the hot committee-meeting, and I am going in here to see Eliza.’

Mrs. Fenwick, with the weight of her daughter’s iniquities on her mind, disappeared into the lodge, while that daughter climbed into the cart. She had a suspicion that she was to be blamed, not pitied for her short memory.

‘Don’t bucket old Pickles along at this pace,’ she remonstrated, ‘or we shall be at home before you have forgiven me, Jack.’

During the afternoon Jack had suffered as a man in his difficult position must suffer; he told himself that he was as irritable as a convalescent, as touchy as a sensitive plant; he told himself that he was an unattractive, powerless failure. His vanity, his self-love, his best part and his worst were all alike hurt and sore. He tried to be patient but he was not patient; for the first time he had found himself wishing that he had left ill alone upon that momentous morning, and had turned his back on Combe.

But yet, so soft-headed a master is he who rules with a rod of steel that Mr. Holland’s indignation could not survive her first remark; it melted at the mere sound of her voice. She sat by his side, she appropriated a giant share of rug, and—how well he loved her, alas for him, how inevitably he loved her!

‘Jack, you are as stiff as buckram.’ Her voice, her dear voice was soft, though her words were without sentiment. ‘Are you going to put out my eye with your left shoulder? The fact is, I forgot—I absolutely forgot all about you.’

‘So I concluded.’

He was in reasonable humour ; that was well.

‘You see,’ she went on glibly, ‘Mrs. Adams was out this morning, and she asked me to go back with her to lunch, so I went—to see her cob. After lunch we rode here ; I had to change, and she persuaded me to go to the meeting. Then Alethea Young asked something about you, and I remembered. So of course——’

‘One explanation is enough, Bab ; “I forgot” did as well as two dozen. Please don’t apologize. I had a delightful afternoon.’

‘That’s all right,’ relieved. ‘Who was there?’

‘The Hayters and Elton, and some people in the house.’

‘I’m so glad,’ cordially. She was cordial, for was he not a sensible, sane person once more? ‘I’m so glad you had a nice time.’

‘It was extremely nice.’

Pickles was now walking up the slight incline leading to the house ; nose to stall and oats, he was disinclined to loiter ; he found that his driver intended he should trot no more so he walked, but at his best pace.

‘The afternoon was extremely nice,’ Jack repeated ; he was no longer sitting square with aggressive left shoulder, but he faced his companion’s profile, upon which he looked as men can look by intention, or do look by habit when good-looking features are within sight.

It is so easy to look more than is felt, so easy to appreciate beauty, so easy to express much by word of mouth ; so impossible to plumb the depth, to gauge the breadth and height, the reality of anything to do with feeling save by the test of time. Under the twinkling starlight, with a moon in the background, without taking the effect of reaction into consideration Jack had temptation to plunge ahead with his uphill courtship.

'Imagine yourself irrevocably hitched on a barbed-wire fence, with the hounds full cry in the vale, Bab; my afternoon was just about as nice as that would be. It is nothing to laugh at; I did not laugh, I bullied my caddie and I thought I should like to bully you.'

She looked overhead.

'Plenty of stars,' she said, as though a good supply was an unusual sight; 'but what a moon, lots of rain in it, Jack.'

He too looked up at that moon of burnished copper sailing amidst a myriad of stars against a faint-hued sky.

'I wonder what they think of us, Bab? I don't expect the stars take us seriously, their sharp eyes wink and twinkle as if the panorama down here was a joke to them; they are an unsympathetic lot: but the moon I like her, she never twinkles at our poor old earth, her eye is large and she sees largely, she looks deep into the life she shines upon; when she's the only light we have down here, she has no cause to wink.'

Perhaps to a young person who had owned that she was 'sick of love' that quick, soft voice of his was a little tiresome, it made Bab uncomfortable to hear him talking like a fool about the moon in a high-flown way.

'The September moon is such a funny colour,' she said, slowly, 'it is like a hot farthing or—or a bad egg.'

She wished to hustle him out of his ridiculous mood, really she was afraid he would kiss her. Of course in time he would come to that, but as yet that time had not arrived, perhaps it would be better to get the first salute over and settle down calmly to these natural outcomes of the crisis. He was looking at her in a threatening way. She followed up her remark by a question.

'Why didn't you come to the meeting? They wanted you to write something humorous for the waxwork programme.'

‘Did *you* want me, Bab?’

‘They were fighting so. Nothing was settled.’

‘Did you want me, Bab? Do you ever want me? If I went away to-morrow would you—if it was a wet, miserable day and you could not go out—would you remember me then, and want me?’

‘But why should you go? You have nothing to do in London, surely you need not go back till after Exeter assize? There is the bazaar and the ball, you never said a word before about going away.’

‘Do you remember the days when I used to scrape the thorns off the stems of the wild roses so that you should pick them without getting pricked? You used to rush off to put your flowers in water and leave me as soon as your hands were full.’

‘You were very good-natured,’ she said quickly.

‘No, it certainly was nature, but not good at all. When I scraped the thorns off in those days I didn’t want the flowers, but now I want my share, Bab, now I want a share of the roses. I love you, darling. I love you.’

This was getting dreadful.

‘I know that,’ said Bab nervously, ‘I know it, Jack, but I wish, I really wish you would try to care a little less, it would be better, I’m sure it would be a great deal better.’

‘Care less?’ he repeated, as Pickles stopped at the hall door. ‘Care less? Teach me your way, Bab,’ he was still immoderately tender though he knew her every trick of voice and manner and he saw she was embarrassed, ‘you have not learned to care more, and I cannot learn to care less. Care more, I can’t do that either, Bab, it is impossible. Care less? Care more? You don’t know what you say. I am afraid you know very little at all about it.’

Bab was getting out of the cart now, she rang the front-door bell with a loud peal.

'What is the use of trying to be rational?' she said to the dogs which leaped and frisked about her as she went, blinking, into the cheerful hall. 'Venom,' addressing the terrier suddenly, 'you are old and wise, you ought to know. Will he get over it when he is married? Will he get as other people are? Say yes, or no.'

Venom yapped a satisfactory yap of assent.

'I knew he would. I felt sure of it. He won't,' reassuring herself, 'worry about the stars, or the moon, or me, when it is settled and we are married just like every one else.'

CHAPTER VI.

Vust 'er rained,
Thin 'er bloard,
Thin 'er 'ail'd,
Thin 'er snoard.

Thin thir cüm
A sho'er o' rain,
Thin 'er froz,
An' bloard agin.

Weather-cast of the West.

'A mariner must have his eye upon rocks and shoals as well as upon the North Star.'

THE master of Combe was very sorry for himself, he lolled his heavy head against his leather chair and sneezed repeatedly, sneezing as though he believed, as his remote forefathers had done, that Satan himself was concealed in the 'Snishuum!' 'Tishum!' 'Ishum!'

Notwithstanding his cold no one had pitied him, he had been left alone since breakfast, he had had to do the cossetting, the compassion, which were his by right, for himself.

No revolution, nor domestic anarchy, nor social rioting were wont to upheave the courses of Combe life under the strong, wise hand which governed his household, but

exception goes to prove the rule. The Tipton bazaar had turned the house upside down and this was but the day before the fair.

His wife had forsaken him, everything which he particularly wanted had gone: the scissors had been taken from the smoking-room table, Captain Fenwick's cash-box and his own ball of twine had disappeared. Rawle was reading the third volume of his novel in the work-room, the post had brought him nothing but bills.

He would have taken his cold out of doors,—for he, like his fellows, treated sickness as an ill to be cured by anything rather than by caution,—but it had rained, as is its accomplished habit in Devon, since daybreak, and was, at seven o'clock in the evening, raining still.

He had rung the smoking-room bell more often than was necessary, he had ordered champagne,—Mary would be tired out,—he had made a roaring fire though the muggy evening was hot as June, and now, with a terrier on his knee, he sat listening for carriage wheels which did not come.

There! he thought as much, he was deaf from this abominable cold for, even while he was listening, the door opened and his daughter came into the room.

'I didn't hear you coming, Bab; how wet you are.' She was indeed, her coat was iridescent with raindrops; the brim of her hat dripped round her face as the edge of a verandah drips when the shower is over. 'Where is your mother?'

'She sent me home; the Adams were going so they drove me, and dropped me at the lodge.'

'Where is your mother?'

'She is still there. Nothing is ready, everything is at sixes and sevens. The workmen had not got the stalls up till an hour ago. Till then we did nothing, there was nothing to do but talk. Now there is a fearful fuss, such a babel, such fights.'

‘Do you mean to tell me that your mother is not coming back to dinner?’

‘I don’t fancy that she or Jack will get away till midnight.’

‘If any one was obliged to stay on you might have done so, you would not knock up. Why on earth didn’t you look after her and send her home?’

‘Send her?’ Bab was laughing; she was amused at the blame to which she was so unaccustomed. ‘She isn’t the sort of mother who gets *sent*.’

‘She doesn’t complain so you think she cannot get tired. Poor Mary, I can imagine how she stood about and ate nothing.’

‘There was *nothing* to eat.’

‘Just like a committee of women! *Nothing to eat?*’

‘Some one bought a few buns; we ate them like wolves. I don’t think mother got more than a currant.’

‘Jack must be off his head. I suppose he was mooning about after you all day, or he would have seen to Mary.’

Bab had taken off her hat, and was shaking the drops of rain upon it off into the fire; her clothes exhumed a thick mist, she was looking fresh and cheerful. Captain Fenwick’s heat of mind did not impress her.

‘I saw very little of Jack,’ she returned; ‘his mother swallowed him up. She was as quarrelsome as a robin, and I heard her saying wondrous things about me.’

‘Twelve hours without food!’ in awed tones; ‘no one *but a wo—*’

‘Jack got us lunch all right; lots of nasty things to eat at the “Plough.”’

‘You have just told me there was nothing to eat.’

‘No *tea*, I meant. It’s one’s tea, don’t you see, that one can’t get on without. I’m so hungry, I’ll go off and get clothed.’

‘Before you go, where are my scissors, Bab? I can keep nothing in this house.’

'No,' with a spontaneous, bubbling laugh, 'no, not even your temper. I will never come home again when you are expecting mother—never, never. You are not a bit pleased to see me.'

On the staircase she stopped laughing—she had always known that she was but second fiddle to either father or mother, she had always known it. Heigh-ho! first fiddles had serious responsibilities. She was Jack's first fiddle, and he wanted her to play all sorts of music of which she did not know the tune. Old airs, with no variations; she had heard them droned out by tiresome women till she was dead sick of the sound. She had no wish to be reduced to the level of such performers. And—she had a crow to pluck with Jack.

She was lively and talkative at dinner, the champagne (which Mrs. Fenwick was not there to drink) and his daughter's sprightliness between them dispelled the migraines and vapours of the master of the house. He and she talked upon the great bird and beast topic, upon the crop topic; their interests were identical. Bab's tongue had no feminine faculty for fine sifting and hole-picking, it was no blacker of blots; it was a good-natured, frank tongue, with small diffidence about it.

The evening did not seem over long. Bab was wide awake. No one sang 'The Devout Lover' as her lullaby, and when the sound of carriage-wheels was heard, she looked up in surprise at the clock.

'It's only ten,' she said; 'they have got through the work faster than I thought possible.'

Captain Fenwick threw down his cards; he and she were in an exciting crisis at bezique, but off he went into the hall to meet the wayfarers.

'When Jack has had his dinner tell him I'm here,' Bab called after her father; 'don't say anything about me till he has finished dinner.'

When she found herself alone in the drawing-room

she set a waste-paper basket at a convenient distance off, and essayed to throw the bezique cards one by one into it. Some time passed before she tired of this game, and the cards were everywhere except in the basket, when she presently halted on the rug and looked impatiently at the clock.

The walls of Combe were thick, the drawing-room was far away from the dining-room, and far from Captain Fenwick's own quarters, whither he had hurried his tired wife and her companion for the soup and champagne, for the royal reception denied his daughter.

Bab leaned her folded arms on the back of a tall oak chair; a black screen, embroidered in gold, was behind her, beside her a high lamp threw its light upon her dress, leaving her face in shadow. Dan, the collie, lay prone at her feet, a dachshund had scratched at the train of her maize dress and turned it into an impromptu bed. Bab was a little out of breath after her card-throwing; she was hot, the colouring of her dress harmonized with her brunette tints, with her brown head and hazel eyes.

She leaned upon the hard carving of the oak chair; it had been a long day. Jack took an unreasonable time over his dinner. At last the door opened, she turned her eyes towards the incomer and looked at him curiously, observantly, as though he was a stranger in whose appearance her interest had been aroused.

‘Here you are at last, Jack. I was waiting for you.’

This was a likely greeting, and its warmth was backed by the dogs' welcome; they rushed at Mr. Holland, revolving round him, whining with pleasure. He stooped to pat the collie, then closed the door and went over to the hearth, standing with his back to the waning fire and looking at the lady of his love.

‘Waiting for me?’ his first look of admiration changed into inquiry. What was the matter? why was Bab waiting for him, and wide awake at eleven o'clock at night?

His fascinations had nothing to do with the case. Bab had something upon her mind, as the saying is; something in her mind was prelude only to something on her tongue, she had no reserves, no secrets, no hidden feelings. What she thought that she spoke; he saw that she was thinking uncomfortable things of him, and that she would certainly speak them.

‘What have I done, Bab? What can it be? What can keep you out of bed to blow me up?’

When this lady was in earnest and in yellow she was at her very best, Jack felt that it would be impossible to take offence at any demand she might make upon his forbearance. She looked anxiously into his face.

‘Have you given out that I’m to stop shooting and hunting when we are married?’ She spoke quickly, in a matter-of-fact, but injured voice, the question had a certain charm about it to his ears.

‘Have I given out that I intend to be Attorney-General? Do I brag that I’m a likely Chancellor? Have we settled anything about which to speculate or to brag?’

‘Do you mean yes or no?’

‘Yes what? No what?’

‘Do you hate my shooting?’

‘I hate nothing of yours, but I deplore a—waste of cartridges.’

Here was a hit direct, though he was in an imperturbable, after-dinner humour. Bab would have liked to have given a Roland for his Oliver had she known where to lay hands on such a commodity; as it was, she repeated her first question with a growing impatience.

‘Did you wait up to cross-examine me?’ he answered.

‘Yes, I did. Is it true that you hate a woman in the coverts or the hunting-field? I heard your mother say so, Charlie Elton heard it too, there was only the canvas of one tent between her and me. She said that if we

marry we should fight fearfully, she said all sorts of nasty things of me, of course, and—and I am to be modelled on my mother. She said that you want a delicate cobweb of a woman for your wife. Is it true, Jack?’

It was not her fault that she had overheard all this, she was no more to blame than he whose mother had been the author of these disquieting remarks. His mother! He frowned instead of smiling, looking grim enough and forbidding enough to awaken Bab’s suspicions.

‘A fable,’ he said. ‘Why did you listen to it?’

‘I was unpacking, I couldn’t go away, and there is some truth in it, Jack, there is a shadow of truth in it.’

‘No, no, no shadow, none. Think how long we have been friends, what good times we have had together. Because we come closer, nearer, because we unite our interests, is that a reason why we should “fight fearfully,” and be ready to cut our throats?’

She was not convinced, she shook her head, watching his face.

‘Bab,’ suddenly, ‘are you a “delicate cobweb”? Are you not my life, my love, my hope, my joy, the very eyes of me?’

There was no cobwebby feel in the hand which she removed from his.

‘Don’t! I want you to say what you mean, not to be stupid. If we are married, shall you be lofty about hunting and shooting? Do you disapprove of my shooting?’

‘I don’t care two straws one way or the other. If you like it, do it by all means. If you don’t, give it up. I think a woman might do—better. I know she can do—worse.’

‘A wet blanket,’ she retorted; ‘you will pull a long face and say, as Mr. Campbell says, “do what you wish,

do what amuses you, however silly it may be," he spoils everything for the girls, Jack, by despising their amusements.'

'*Despise.*'

'Yes, despising their interests. A man often despises his wife, I've noticed it.'

'Bab, you talk at random.' It confounded him to see the vastness of her ignorance. 'Is it a rule of life that a man should despise his wife? Don't say such wretched things, such miserable rubbish. When I ask you to give up anything to please me, then I think it will be time to quarrel with me. Then you may begin to dread the time that I shall bully and despise my wife.'

'You are exaggerating, Jack, I am not dreading anything. It was natural to tell you what I heard, as it made me think. I thought we might get into one of those jarring, nagging, uncomfortable couples, like the old Adams. I thought you really might fancy I should change into a domestic person with a mind on maids, a soul for books. That I should take to sitting in the house, and to needle-work, and to straining my ears for your footsteps when we were married. I shan't, you know, I'm sure I shan't. I *hate* the house, Jack, I love to be out, *out, out*. I can't breathe stuffing in a room and poring over books. I want to move, to feel my hat on my head, and the earth under my feet, and the fresh air round me. Don't marry me, Jack, if you want me different; don't try to change me. I got a panic, I thought you had a plan to make me alter everything.'

She was in earnest; she appealed to him, as she had done long ago. As a child when she had wanted his help, when she had found she was only a girl with petticoats, and other like weaknesses to contend with in the hard day's work.

Bab had lit on a vein of truth in this last accusation; she had lit upon a deeply buried conviction the existence

of which its owner had not himself perceived, until she put it into words.

In truth, Jack had not pictured his wife among the mangolds and the turnips; he had not pictured her among the 'gee-woas,' and the 'stand-overs,' and the buckets of water, and the horses. He had not pictured their *tête-à-tête* discourse of birds and beasts, of runs and shoots, of crops and weather.

He knew, in his heart of hearts, that Bab's picture of the domestic person with needlework and strained ears had been sketched upon the canvas of his imagination as a married Queen Bab; so that when she turned his anticipation into ridicule, when she accused him of it, when she appealed against it, he felt guilty.

'Isn't it better to put off worrying yourself till Christmas is past? It is a premature sort of discussion, when,' his head was inclining to one side, he was going to be tiresome, 'when the time comes, dar——'

'Oh,' shortly, 'you are begging the question.'

'May I never show you what I feel? Will you never try to understand me?'

'I understand all right, Jack. Do you think that you are the only person who talks about all that sort of thing to me? I assure you that the Campbells talk of nothing else.'

'Poor Bab,' his smile was grim, his fancy chuckled though his heart did ache.

'I know you want me to be weak in the head about you; you oughtn't to grumble, for it is much better than if I was weak in the head about every other man I saw. You don't know what girls are; when they begin falling in love they don't seem to be able to stop. Oh, it's appalling, they confide in me and I really can't remember who it is they *don't* love: there are so many of them and such changes.'

'If you,' gravely, 'would only begin, Bab, I would teach you where to stop.'

'I should think "to be loved" means "to be bored," in nine cases out of ten.'

'You know nothing about it, then.'

'I must say you are very good,' with a complimentary smile, 'you don't often, at least you don't always talk in that way.'

'As the years go by you will find out, perhaps, what I feel without a word of mine.'

'I,' looking at him scrutinizingly, 'I wonder why you like me? I often think it's only fancy, Jack.'

'In, say, ten years' time, I wonder if then you will still think it a *fancy*?'

'Ten years, I shall be thirty-two, it isn't old—one can go on doing everything at thirty-two just the same, women ride to hounds at sixty. And, Jack, you have not any plans for modelling me? We will give and take, give and take, as we have done.'

She was so unconscious of her huge takings and her scanty givings, that any one save a man of Jack's calibre must have been forced to speak 'some certain truths of her.' He did not even think them, so thick was the smoke in his head. He turned away from her, leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece and his head on his hand. His wooing did not prosper, words were breath wasted, and now-a-days, no feat of arms, no deed of chivalry could be used for his purpose. Patience was his only weapon, and it was a miserably weak one.

'Of course,' she proceeded cheerily, 'I didn't believe a word your mother said.' This was a pleasing admission. 'But Major Elton said you weren't a sportsman, and he chaffed me about it, so I thought I'd tell you. It is very late, I must go now.'

'You have a hard day before you. Oh!' the door opened, and as it did so the speaker returned to the rug, 'here is Captain Fenwick.'

‘Bab, you up still? This is a miracle. Your miracle, Jack; you must be proud.’

No one saw the joke. Bab said she really must go, and hurried off with a nod of good-night to the mankind, humming ‘Drink, puppy, drink,’ on her way.

No, Jack was not going to bed; he had not seen the paper, he should go to the smoking-room. Was anything wrong? Certainly not; he was only a bit tired after all the labour at Tipton. With such a cold Captain Fenwick ought to be in bed, and Captain Fenwick took the hint and went.

It is a sick heart, or a sick head, that drives its owner to take to pacing his room in the small hours, instead of taking to his bed. No one but the rats had wakeful nights at Combe, they frisked behind the wainscoting, but every other living thing in the house was decently asleep.

The smoking-room was full of photographs of Bab; the young man did not read the paper, he walked from frame to frame looking at the daughter of the house in many a different stage of her existence.

Other women tired their heads and dressed themselves up, and were photographed within the house, curtains or screens in the background, flowers or books about them. Not so Miss Fenwick. Here she was as a baby thing strapped in a pannier on her donkey by the porch; here, barefooted, digging on the sands by the sea; here swinging under the cedar on the lawn; here seated on her pony in the stableyard—these were likenesses of her during childhood.

Later on, with her mane of hair up, and her skirts of a somewhat more advanced length, she was pictured as the centre of a group of men and guns; she stood leaning on her own gun, with a pile of dead game at her feet; setters, retriever, spaniel, crouched on the grass among the sportsmen. Here again was Bab clad in

cloth cap and rough, open coat, sitting square-shouldered and bolt upright in her cart ; Bab on her hunter ; Bab in her habit ; Bab everywhere about the room, and always *out*, *out*, *OUT*.

Unfortunate man that he was, his head-quarters were in London, and she knew it. She must know, surely she must know that thither Mrs. Holland would be taken by her husband ; she must know that the *out*, *out*, *OUT*, for which she clamoured would be, for the greater part of the year, the sort of *out* which is taken in streets. Where the hat on her head must be ornamental, neither billycock nor nondescript of frieze ; where the earth under her feet would be very much disguised ; where the air around her would be vitiated, heavy, exhausted, nothing fresh about it save the adjective. Why did she talk in that matter-of-fact way about being married, and then talk almost violently of her intention to be *out*, *out*, *OUT* ?

She had a youthful way of living from hour to hour ; she did not often allude to any future, but to-day his mother's fables had had effect upon her imagination, she had been driven to think. Did she imagine that Jack could be added to the Combe *ménage* merely as 'Bab's husband,' with no other distinction, no tangible position ? Impossible ; she had as great a contempt for an idle man as Jack had himself. He took up her latest photograph and looked at it long and earnestly, and yet as he did this he told himself that to live such a life would be impossible,—utterly impossible.

He loved her with all his heart, with all his mind, but there are other ingredients than mind or heart which go to form a man. Jack was energetic, ambitious, keen for success in the ranks of his profession.

'For more than passion goes to make a man.'

He was not a poor man ; from the old rector of Combe he had inherited an income sufficient to make him

independent of a wife's fortune ; unhappily for him, the independence of £ s. d. was all the independence he had in regard to Bab. She had talked to him of 'give and take' ; had she planned to take every blessed thing of his and spoil it ?

The thought was treasonable, she was guileless, generous, frank. If she was slow to feel legitimate pangs to be *out, out, out* with him, or to be *in, in, in* her husband's home (whether that home were in Honolulu or in Hampstead), that was his fault, every fault was his ; as a true lover should, he took the blame to himself. He left his finger-marks on the photograph frames, and his track on the carpet, all in vain.

'O time, thou must untangle this, not I,
It is too hard a knot for me to untie.'

That was the end of his reasonings, he left his fate to time. *Time*, to which we confide our future when we are powerless to help ourselves in the present. Time is a desperate remedy.

CHAPTER VII.

Happy thou art not,
For what thou hast not, still thou strivest to get.
Measure for Measure.

'For a dream cometh through the multitude of business.'

AN hour ago the greatest lady in Devon had opened the Tipton bazaar. The prejudiced advocate of the superiority of our sex must own the feminine voice to be but a wretched medium for public declamation. In thin, shrill tones the great lady had declared that 'she had much pleasure in opening the bazaar, and really,' with an appealing glance at her nervous daughter, 'really, she was sure,' losing her place and becoming colloquial

and deprecating, 'everybody in the neighbourhood hoped it would be a great success, and—and—and everybody had taken so much trouble, and everything was so pretty and so tempting, and, therefore, she again declared the bazaar to be open.'

Here a solemn gipsy, two feet high, led forward by a gipsy mamma, heaved up, in shaky little hands, an enormous bouquet, which the great lady accepted graciously, and into which she dipped her nose several times, with staccato gestures, as she stepped down from the daïs into the encampment.

'We are longing to see all the *beautiful* things more closely,' the distinguished impostor murmured, between her smiles, to the bystanders.

'Audaciously worthless,' she said to her daughter on her way home, 'the things they sold were audaciously worthless, there was absolutely nothing to buy, and I have spent twenty pounds in buying it: the house is ruinous, but the dear boy's seat must be our first consideration.'

Now the bazaar was in full swing, the Town-hall was packed from end to end, buyers crowded the stifling tents, every one was frauding, or being frauded, and doing it pleasantly and thoroughly.

Gipsies, of all nations under heaven, were 'doing' their customers at every turn. Their fixed smiles, their suave interest in the transactions, their genial temper abetted their dishonesty, concealed their design.

Jack Holland sat in a caravan at the extreme end of the encampment. He had volunteered to do anything except to 'dress up,' and the committee had entrusted to him the management of the raffling trade. He was head of the department and master of the caravan in which the fortune-teller held her *séance*. All day long the rattle of lottery counters was about his ears. Round about the caravan traffic was congested. Gipsies

with raffling papers pressed about the wheels, clamouring that their turn had come for his attention, he was worked as a willing horse, worked as though the willingness was but a feather in the driver's cap. Those people who had taken shares in the various raffles, watched him narrowly with keen suspicion, they openly suspected him of guile ; while the gipsies soothed the losers and encouraged the winners, thus,

‘Here you are, Mr. Cobley, you’re the lucky man ; here is the fan, you have won it. Now, you really must take a share for this screen, I bring you luck !’

‘Poor Miss Warren, have you not got the cosy after all ? I did *so hope* you would get it. I am so sorry.’

The personal sympathy of these jingling, genial gipsies was seductive, the fresh raffling papers were soon refilled with the names of victims, and all went merry as a marriage bell.

Jack rattled, and wrote, and smiled to himself. Luckily it is the way of the world to shout at a win and to whisper over a loss, so the few who draw prizes in raffles, or elsewhere, noise their takings abroad and act as decoy-ducks, while those many who draw blanks hold their tongues, like wise people.

He could find few legitimate instants in which to look across the crowd to the far end of the room where his own gipsy stood beside a huge cauldron, suspended from an iron triangle, and from which people ladled out ‘surprises’ at sixpence a dip from a well of sawdust. His own gipsy, this queen of gipsies had no spare moment, legitimate or otherwise, to waste on the proprietor of a caravan, she was far too busy.

Customers thronged about her ; spruce, alert, and keen to do a thriving trade, she sold her ladlefuls as fast as hands could ply them. She wasted no time in unnecessary civilities, but gave change with laborious reckoning, wrapped awkward parcels awkwardly but

with a business-like precision. Intent on diminishing her stock, she worked in earnest as it was her wont to play.

The afternoon had worn away in hard toil, the lights had long been lit, trade had slackened for the time while the thirsty people surged round the tea tent. Mrs. Fenwick had been dragged forth from her tent by her husband who, manlike, was out of touch with the money-grubbing enthusiasm.

‘If a hundred pounds was wanted, for heaven’s sake write a cheque; Mary should not dig her grave in search of half-a-crown.’

He dragged her off to the calming contemplation of waxworks who melted, poor things, in a free library, at intervals of a quarter of an hour; while Mrs. Fenwick’s littered stall was set in order by her contingent of gipsy helpers.

Still Bab worked with a group of buyers thick around her; her head was getting tired, the arithmetic of traffic had tied a tight string of thought round her forehead which was marked with faint lines. She had not talked, and smiled, and toiled in vitiated air for several consecutive hours without receiving the hall-marks of her labour; there were indications of crow’s-feet about her eyes, amiable traceries of her ingratiating smiles round her mouth.

Fah! she was tired, she wanted something;—of course she wanted her tea, she had missed her tea. Where was Jack? She looked about and espied him in the caravan,—she caught his eye and made a sign indicating that she had orders for him. She did not watch the effect of the sign, she did not doubt what it would be.

More children ladled out their sixpenny surprises, more lads and lasses tried their luck in the cauldron but Jack had not come; again she looked at the caravan, he was not there, a gunner-boy from the

barracks was in his seat, rattling the lottery-box in his stead, and hemmed in by gipsies.

She arrested a stall-holder who passed her just then.

'Look after my cauldron for a little while, will you? I'm going to get tea. Oh, Jack, where have you been? I want tea, I've a tongue like a parrot.'

Jack was always so useful a friend when tea or tickets, carriages or cloaks were necessary; he was late, which was unusual, in taking his orders—he was indifferent, which was yet more strange, to Queen Bab's thirst.

'Can you get away?'

'Yes, Miss Cane will sell for me, but I would rather you brought me my tea, it is cooler here.'

'But I want you outside; skirt round the fringe of the crowd this way.'

'Why do you want *me* outside? What is the matter?'

'Alethea is ill; she has been telling fortunes the whole day in that beastly caravan, the thermometer 92°; she looks dead, but it is a faint, they tell me.'

To faint, to weep, to fall in love, these amiable weaknesses of her sex did not appeal to Bab's compassion, she reckoned the trio in the same catalogue of unattractive eccentricities.

'Oh, faint, is she? you need not be frightened, Jack, she often faints—in church or when she's at all overdone,' the voice was not sympathetic; he might be tender over these cobwebby women, but they did not appeal to her compassion.

'She never gives in, she goes till she drops. She's all your pluck, Bab, but not your muscle.'

Pluck was the attribute which the hearer canonized, it was absurd to apply such a word to poor Alethea.

As she followed Jack, winding her way in and out among the people, she met Lady Young face to face,

who laid her soft fat hand upon Bab's arm and arrested her.

'Where are you taking my son to, Miss Fenwick? Not off duty, I hope.'

'Fatigue-duty, Lady Young; Alethea has collapsed, he is taking me to revive her.'

Lady Young was in excellent humour. Social joys such as she appreciated had fallen to her lot throughout the day, she had picked up crumbs of news about all sorts and conditions of men. The great lady had bought her embroidered table-cloth; tea, at a shilling a head, was selling as fast as frantic vendors could serve it; Lady Young had won the smart screen which had been raffled at the Combe stall, and she knew that Mrs. Fenwick did not wish her handiwork to be landed at Woodbury. Now she was sauntering away from her work, meaning to enjoy a little rest and a great deal of conversation.

'I got her out into the cloak-room for some air, she is faint.'

'As it is scarcely a case for a mash, or Elliman, I hardly understand what Miss Fenwick will do,' laughing very much. 'When Ally is ill, poor dear, I find it best to ignore, or to scold her for her little ailments. They are a great amusement to her, so we must not deprive her of them altogether.'

Jack was never his natural self when his mother was in earshot, he stiffened in manner and in mind.

'Alethea looks ghastly,' he said.

'Go and play good Samaritans, by all means, I mustn't keep you. Don't allow Jack to doctor Ally into hysterics, Miss Fenwick, she is always worse when he is at Woodbury.'

'The heat in that caravan is enough to kill any woman.'

'Yes, yes, yes, Jack, any one can take you in.'

Such an accusation is not relished by the accused, he frowned, but Bab looked at him with friendly eyes; acuteness is a valuable but it is not an ingratiating quality, a simple, credulous person may be green but he is almost sure to be nice.

The window of the cloak-room was wide open. Alethea lay beneath it on the floor, her head raised on a roll of cushions; a woman was kneeling beside her, bathing her forehead, her hair was drenched on her forehead. She looked so ill that Bab, her disdain changed into sick fear, did all she was told to do for the sufferer, too alarmed to speak. She had never seen any one faint, she had had no sort of experience in illness, but she held salts and administered brandy when she was shown how to do so.

Her hands were deft and steady, but never in her life had Bab been so glad to see anything as she was now, when she saw Alethea's eyelids flicker and unclosed, when she saw her smile feebly at Jack, who was chafing her hands.

'That's right, Ally, you are better.'

'I am quite well,' raising her head quickly, but letting it fall again, for it swam and reeled when she moved.

'You are nothing of the sort. Keep quiet—and drink this.'

Was Jack 'doctoring her into hysterics'? His voice was not soft, as Bab knew its softness, and yet tears came rushing down Alethea's cheeks as he spoke. Bab had never cried in her life save when she had the toothache, and once when she had lost her temper.

Without directions, she held the salts again cruelly close to the poor thing's nose.

'If you cry it does no good, and you make yourself worse,' she said, earnestly, persuasively.

'Is that you, Bab?' the tears stopped flowing. 'I

didn't see you. Yes, some more water. I shall be all right in a moment.'

Very soon she was sitting up, trying to get rid of the good Samaritans, and declaring she was perfectly well.

'You will go straight home,' said Jack.

'No, nonsense! you know how I hate my health, don't make a fuss about it. Let me keep here quietly out of sight, don't let my disgrace be public.'

'Why should you be doomed to sit here on a kitchen chair till ten o'clock? You are fit for nothing but bed, you must get straight home;' looking at Bab to enforce his commands. 'I will go and see for the carriage.'

'The carriage went back, it won't be here till ten. Bab, take my side, ask him not—not—oh,' putting her hand to her forehead and pushing back the wet hair, 'I cannot remember what I meant to say, my—my head works like a steam-engine.'

'So does your tongue, dear,' said Lady Young, from the threshold. The strains of the band, the trample of feet, the hum of voices came through the open door with her disquieting presence. 'If you don't feel well, you had better not talk so much.'

'It was very hot. The strain of fortune-telling on my imagination was immense. It was silly of me, but it did me up. I'm all right now.'

'All right' with those grey, trembling lips? Jack could not bear to hear her excuses. Alethea was a constant weight upon his mind, he felt guilty concerning her. She was too small and fragile to be a target for shafts, however trifling they might be. There had been occasions on which he had done battle for her in the past, but the battles had not made her life any the easier.

'If you are fit for it I should go back to your post, the evening people are thronging in, and all the maids will want their fortunes told.'

'She is *not fit* for it, Lady Young,' said Miss Fenwick. 'Jack, go down for the carriage, it's put up at the "Plough," tell them to come round at once.'

She gave her prompt orders, as a person whose wishes are undisputed can give them; her three auditors were all a little startled, though in divers ways, by her words. Bab had been frightened, concerned, touched by Alethea's illness, she was unaccustomed to these sensations, they upset her; she looked with reproachful eyes upon the incomer.

'If people are coming fast don't stay away from your stall, Lady Young,' she said. 'I will look after Alethea, I will stay with her until the carriage comes round, and I will see her off.'

Jack looked at her as though she had suggested martyrdom; and she was a magnificent martyr. She stood on guard above wan, worn Alethea, who looked pale and faded in her incongruous dress, the gorgeous colouring of which accentuated her lack of health and the loss of her youth.

Bab did, for once in a way, 'in her attire show her wit.' Her figure was beautiful, the soft blouse, fine as cobweb, white as may-blossom, showed the full curves and graceful lines liberally; her slender waist was swathed in an ornamental scarf, richly embroidered; her necklace of sequins, and the bordering of sequins upon her scarlet and gold skirt tinkled and jangled as she moved. The handkerchief which bound her head had ruffled the trim hair round her brow, thereby softening her face.

Jack, with an eloquent look at Queen Bab in her rôle of ministering angel, went off for the carriage, while Lady Young held up her pince-nez, through which she looked sharply at the last speaker. Was Bab interested in Jack? Had it come to this? No, she was merely angry with Jack's mother.

‘So I am dismissed, Miss Fenwick. I know you have your father in good order, but I’m not sure he will like the extra twelve miles for the horses, he will think you carry your good offices a little far.’

Bab thought this herself. When Lady Young was gone, she sat down on another kitchen chair and laughed.

‘Your step-mother always annoys me, Ally. And she is a shoddy sort of person—not worth it. My dear, I beg your pardon; I forgot. I was very rude; but we are sort of fellow-sufferers.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, Ally,—I am one of those unlucky people who can keep nothing to themselves. I’m a sieve.’

‘It is nice to be a sieve, Bab; everything trickles by you, you get rid of the past and are ready for fresh impressions. You know the rhyme,

My heart is a sieve,

In which loves and affections are danced up and down for a minute
or two,

And the finer they are the more sure to go through.

Oh, it’s a comfortable, convenient thing to be a sieve. So little is expected from a sieve.’

Over-work, smelling-salts and brandy had had an odd effect on Alethea; a great force of feeling, over-big for the little, insignificant frame, glowed in her pale eyes. Bab looked at her in surprise, with a puzzled smile.

‘Bab, are we to share mothers-in-law? Is that what you mean?’

‘Nothing is settled. It’s on the cards; but it is one of those *dead secrets* which I am always letting out.’

‘Are you engaged?’

‘No, no, it is only I’m not exactly disengaged. Now, don’t talk, keep quiet, you are getting green again.’

When Alethea had been ensconced in the carriage with rugs and smelling-salts, with every attention which a sickly woman has any reason to want from man or

woman, Jack and Bab went back to their encampment together.

'We have only wasted half-an-hour,' she said, as she drank her tea to an accompaniment of the charming things which Jack was saying to her. He credited her with all the cardinal virtues because of this thing that she had done; but then he snatched at any excuse for making love to her now-a-days; and she, eating macaroons and balanced on a three-legged stool, bore with him placidly enough till her meal was ended.

'I must get back to my cauldron. I wish I could have got off with Alethea, I have had enough of this. By the bye, Jack, tell father that I sent her back in our carriage, and explain why. You always break things diplomatically, and he'll be furious.'

Captain Fenwick was angry, but anger in a crowd and in a bustle loses all its terrors. Upon the homeward drive it was too late to scold, and Bab was apathetically calm, leaning back in her corner of the carriage. Jack had eyes and ears for no one but for the yawning, weary gipsy beside him, who could think of nothing but £ s. d. and her own takings.

At Woodbury Alethea lay on a sofa telling her father her version of the day's fair. He was like a boy out for a holiday when he found himself alone with his little daughter. The ox and the brawling woman, or the civilized equivalents for those possessions were his, and he took them in the civilized way, he kept up appearances of indifference to the ox and relish for the woman.

When Lady Young was near, the father and daughter found it wise to see little of each other, to be undemonstrative, distant, cold; but the cat was away and the mice expanded. Alethea's tongue went fast. Even to a man's unobservant eyes she was not quite her natural self; every incident of the weary day seemed to have amused her, but her eyes did not make merry. By and

by Lord Young began to suspect there was something wrong.

‘You are tired out, my dear. I’m afraid you haven’t had a happy day.’

‘Happy!’ she repeated, in the light, airy way of speaking that she affected. ‘Don’t you know, happiness is not to be found at a bazaar, father; it is nowhere to be found except among the aitches in the dictionary.’

‘Tut, tut, Ally, nonsense! You have been doing too much.’

‘Too little,’ she said; ‘I always do too little.’

‘And talk too much,’ said her father, laughing, and yet anxious.

‘Yes, too much. I like to talk big in the how, when, where, and why way that’s fashionable. Let me talk big of the world and I; we superfluous women talk very tall, we draw “the world” in to back us up. There is no one else whom we can draw. Other people can talk small, of “we two,” of “you and I”; *they*——’

‘My dear, you are talking nonsense.’

‘Papa, I will tell you a bit of sensible news. It is a secret, but I think Jack will marry Bab Fenwick.’

‘You call that *news*; I heard it from your mother when the boy was in petticoats. It will be an excellent thing for Jack, but they are a long while about it; those premeditated matches never come off. So she sent you home in the carriage? Ha, ha! Those precious chestnuts. I wonder what Fenwick said to her? I wouldn’t be in her shoes.’

‘Bab always does what she likes with chestnuts, and what not. She is lucky; she would not let me tell her fortune, but I know it.’

‘You have tired yourself out, Ally. Telling fortunes is that what you have been doing? What odd ways people find in which to waste their money. Did you tell your own fortune—eh?’

'Yes, papa. It is a good deal mixed up with yours.'

'Well, well, I'm glad of that. I'm glad your line of life runs on at Woodbury, my dear.'

'Though I'm a superfluous woman, yet I'm not a superfluous daughter, so I ought to be satisfied.'

'Are you not satisfied, Alethea? There, my dear, don't talk; you are tired to death.'

'Not to death, but to enervation. I talk of nothing but myself in consequence. I am telling secrets. I think I'll take my line of life to bed and sleep upon it. Mamma will be coming home presently.'

'Then be off at once; she'll want a listener, I shall be here.'

'Good-night.'

'Good-night, Ally.' He kissed her, patting her head as though she was still a child. 'I'm glad your line of life runs on at Woodbury.'

'I'm glad too,' she faltered, but half-heartedly.

CHAPTER VIII.

But keep one course though the rough wind say, no.

King Henry VI.

'A wilful man should be very wise.'

It took the neighbourhood some time to calm after the controversies, the heart-burning, the fatigue and excitement of the bazaar.

Talked thin and threadbare, the topic was exhausted and wore away: the coming October ball usurped its place as a new love casts out the old. The ball was an annual function, held at the county town, and was an event of importance. The twelve mile drive thither from Combe handicapped the treat in the eyes of some people, but with a roomy 'bus, judiciously filled, the

revellers were not wont to complain, overmuch, of the distance.

The Fenwicks had, according to their custom, gathered a well-assorted party together for the ball.

On the morning preceding the festivity the elder Mary Fenwick did, with serious dissatisfied eyes, behold her daughter drive off with a trio of her special friends in the cart, *en route* for golf and lunch at Burton.

Brunette spun down the drive. Jack Holland and a nephew of Captain Fenwick, a Mr. Lascelles, were perched on the narrow back seat of the cart, holding on by the skin of their teeth, for the horse pranced in unpremeditated angles on her way irrespective of her driver's will ; Mrs. Fenwick watched the departure, and sighed.

Bab was debonair and serene, but she was the only contented person at Combe ; her affairs were not satisfactory save to herself.

The lane of courtship may be long, but it should have a turning. No man on earth will go on and on between restricting hedges without an occasional glimpse of the open country around, and a chance of reaching the end of his walk.

Mrs. Fenwick had assured herself a hundred times that Bab was not altogether to blame ; a pauper cannot, with the best intentions, be generous to a beggar. Poor Jack ! He was not getting on, he was in the long lane and getting a little sick of the march. He kept his failures and his heart-aches to himself. He was proud enough not to make himself ridiculous, but he was too much in love to be reasonable.

A hundred times Mrs. Fenwick had seen him cut to the quick, and had pretended to be as blind as her daughter. A hundred times she had feared to see his place vacant, and to hear that the foolish scheme of theirs was over. It would be better that it should be at an end.

If he should be mad enough to keep Bab to her promise, if he should be so blind as to marry her. What then? What sort of future would theirs be?

The fairy-tale finis, 'so they married and were happy ever after,' is very good as the fictional end of a myth. 'So they married and life began in earnest,' was what Mrs. Fenwick's past taught her to expect of matrimony.

She had been lucky; dear heaven, through what dark places she had struggled to her luck! How well she had known the heart-ache! Well enough to feel for others without reserve, without the sort of sympathy which a man shrinks from; the 'men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love' consolation, as though death and the worms to eat are but of one open, churchyard, burial kind.

As are most happy women, Mary Fenwick was an idealist. She did not want Bab to marry unless she understood fully what she was doing; she knew what a hurried, careless marriage might entail. Her marriage had been hurried, careless, but she had married Godfray, so all was well.

Not so with her sister, her younger sister, Mrs. Kaufmann, who was arriving at Combe for the ball that day; Mrs. Kaufmann had made a hash of matrimony,—she had achieved it lightly, and it had been a mistake. She was a lively, a brilliantly lively woman, gay, sociable, and a great favourite in her own circle, and—and Mary hoped, with a hope which was as fervent as a prayer, that her daughter should have a different fate, a better fate.

Dear Cicely, poor Cicely, she made the best that she could, perhaps, of a difficult fortune, but—Mrs. Fenwick heaved a sigh. She should see this dear sister of hers soon, she would go to meet her at the station. There are many people at whose side we love to be, but about whom we cannot bear to think, about whose life we are afraid to speculate.

It was a gala day at Combe. The household was stirred by arrivals; even at the lodge there was a tea-party. Becket was taking an early cup of tea with Mrs. Basten.

Becket was a very great person in the valley. It was an honour to show her hospitality; but, like hospitality shown to a king the entertainment was best when over, most enjoyable in retrospect. The five Basten children had been driven, with their puppy and their lesson-books, into the kitchen. In the parlour, the unnaturally clean and orderly parlour the guest and hostess sat at a table, covered with a cloth of pickled-cabbage hue and pattern, drinking black tea and talking—at least, Becket was talking in a gracious and friendly strain. She praised the flavour of the tea, admired the sleeping baby in the cradle at her feet, did not openly wince at the clatter of small feet on flags, the whine of the dog, or the squeak of slate pencils, when such disturbances came through the open kitchen door.

But Mrs. Basten was nervous; she knew Becket was one of those deadly sort of women who 'are fond of children when they are good,' and she broke into the conversation with the occasional shout of a violent order to the miscreants next door.

'Bide quiet thease minit, chillern; yü be sich chitter-boxes us can't yer owerzels spake. Awe, Mrs. Bucket, yü bant agwaine zo zune, zure-lie? Why, tidden up af-pass five. Dü 'ee bide a bit lon'er, now dü 'ee. Th' maester 'ull be terrabul upzot to find 'ee gon' win 'ee comes intü 'ouze. I tell un 'ee's a füle about 'ee,' this banteringly; then, with a hurried glance at the kitchen, 'Putten down, Bill; let th' dug be, will 'ee? Be 'ee agwaine to put un down, Bill? I tell 'ee whot tez, I'll vetch 'ee a clout in tha hayd, I will, and turn thickee dug out o' doar.'

Becket ignored these asides.

'I'm sure Mr. Basten won't be more disappointed than I am,' helping herself to bread, spread thick with clotted cream, 'but I am afraid I must go. You see, it's the ball to-night, and we have the house full. You know, Mrs. Basten, I'm not free with my time like you married people.'

'Free wi' a macster and chillern? Wot stuff be 'ee tellin' up, my dear sawle. Us be bound hand an' füt' fro' church tü churchyard. Tez like thease yer, us düs ut becaz tez natur—but tidden fraydum. A maester wants a dale o' patience; an' chillern,' with a proud glance at the cradle, which belied her words, 'an' chillern be zarten cares and onzarten comferts. But thir, th' maester an' me 'ave wondur'd times 'pon times 'ow tez yü bant marrid yerzel, Mrs. Bucket.'

Mrs. Becket pushed her chair back from the table, fetched her bonnet-strings from where they dangled, free from the dangers of tea, down her back, and began to tie them under her chin.

'Too much choice confounds the fancy,' she said, with a sigh.

'Tez lik that thir wi' th' young miss. 'Er'll git the crüked stick tü las ev 'er bides tü lang a maid, Mrs. Bucket. Why dornt 'er take Mr. Jack, 'eer be wull growd an' clane-skinned: I zeed un lüking saft tü she, passen long an Zinday aternoön: and her drove un pass here s'marnen wi' some other gintle-folk. Goan wi' yer larnen, Bill, if I 'ears un squake agin, out 'er'll go. Zuse me, Mrs. Bucket, but they chillern be mazed bout thickee little dug o' th' maester's. 'Ee bant very awld, and pullen and draggen un about 'er dawnt graw; us reckons 'er'll turn out a güde shipdug same as 'er muther be.'

'Don't think I mind a noise or a dog, Mrs. Basten. Why, the dogs at Combe are in and out of the work-room like sparrows in the ivy, and before that, they

were in and out of the school-room, and in and out of the nursery too. Miss Fenwick had no company but the dogs.'

'An' Mr. Jack, 'ee üsen to lade th' pawny up Cümbe hill, wi' 'er pin tap ov un, avore 'er was as 'igh as my Liza; 'ee was a füle bout th' little maid from fust along;—dawnt dü. Us wasteses th' shullen us finds on th' rawde. A man dawnt get zet store an, ef 'er makes imzel zo chape.'

Becket rose,—a garrulous farewell is a long affair,—smiling as though she knew a good joke which she was forced to keep to herself.

'Dear, dear, how much we talk and how little we know, Mrs. Basten. I must hurry now, they ought to be back from Burton by this time; and it's "Becket, Becket, Becket," all over the house when anything's wanted. There, it's striking six, and Mrs. Kaufmann will be arriving any moment, and so put about if I'm out when she comes up to her room.'

'Awe,' Mrs. Basten stooped to rock the cradle. Certain recreations of the better classes were to her unsophisticated mind incomprehensible, the matrons of her standing cannot conjugate the verb to flirt, a hard-and-fast line is drawn which forbids any trifling with certain of the commandments, they judge their '*bettors*' as they themselves would be judged. "'Er be coming, be 'er? Tez tü countrified in thease yer parts für sich as she. Wull, wull, living up tü Lunnon, wi' naw chick, an' wi' sich a powerful dale of money, tain't no wun'er hur's a bit gay 'pon times. Us dornt belave awl us yers, Mrs. Bucket.'

The offensive word 'gay' finished off the arrangement of Becket's bonnet-strings and hooked her dolman.

'Believe nothing you hear against Mrs. Kaufmann,' she was very angry, 'those who belie her are not fit to wash the dishes in her scullery; let them attend to the

work they are used to, and not interfere with matters they can't understand, any more than they can understand dead languages, nor gentle-folk's feelings, nor dumb animals' speech.'

Poor Mrs. Basten had made a *faux pas*; she found herself in a hole, and by way of extrication she turned the dangerous topic by attacking her family.

'Thir,' she cried, 'thir be thickee dug squakin' agin. Out o' ouze er'l goa, I warn'd 'ee I'd dü et. Com yer, Shep, com yer, püp.' She rushed into the now silent kitchen, and drove therefrom a large unwieldy puppy, chasing him across the parlour and out through the opened door into the drive. Becket, still huffy and bridling, followed his lead; Mrs. Basten saying,

'Wull, if yü must goa yü mus,' then the speaker's cultivated ear caught the sound of wheels. 'Hark, thir 's th' dog-cart tü las, yü stip back into th' poarch a minit, Mrs. Bucket, and let 'un pass, I'll jist rin an öpe the gaytes.'

She did so and none too soon, for the cart came up the incline very fast indeed. Between the cry of 'Gate, gate,' and the flashing into sight of the carriage and its cargo was but the twinkling of an eye; the speed was not slackened as it turned through the posts, the speed was not slackened at Mrs. Basten's scream of,

'Mind th' dug, miss. Lük, where 'un be an' th' roaide. Awe, my dear life, er's urn'd ovir 'un.'

Neither was the speed slackened when the yelps of the poor puppy, the frantic prolonged yelps of pain, proclaimed its sufferings, it was not slackened at the command to,

'Pull up, pull up. Where on earth are you going to?'

In fact, the mare had taken the command of the cart into her own mouth. As she disliked a noise she shook herself, laying back her ears to show her annoyance. She saw no reason for stopping in such a pandemonium, but rushed on, increasing her pace for the wheels bowled

easily on the smooth drive, and she was near her happy home. She had been given her head during the greater part of the homeward way, now she took what she was no longer given.

The driver's wrist was strong, but it was a slender woman's, not a wrist of steel, so though Miss Fenwick put forth all her strength, and, leaning back, pulled steadily at the reins, she might as well have pulled at the great Wellingtonia, which they dashed by just then, for all the impression she made upon the pace.

Dark, like the mouth of a cavern, the drive, shaded by trees, stretched before them.

'Was it a child or a dog?' asked Bab's little neighbour, Miss Wren, awe-stricken.

'A dog,' said Mr. Holland, shortly. 'Steady, Bab.'

'Wonder what damage you did, Bab?' said her cousin, Jim Lascelles. 'Not murder, there was too much hulla-balloo for death. My dear, this mare of yours is a bit too much for you, we shall take the next gate at the gallop if you don't impress her bit upon her shortly.'

'Is there a gate?' said Bab's neighbour, nervously.

'Five barred. Hold on, Miss Wren, here is my hand, or there is the bar, cling to which you think firmest; it's a high gate.'

Bab laughed, but Miss Wren was frightened, it was so dark under the trees.

'Do stop it,' she urged, 'do, *stop*. Can't you catch hold of the reins? Oh, it is running away, Mr. Lascelles; let me go, don't hold me, I want to jump out.'

'The gate is open all right. I was only chaffing. If you want to get killed jump out, if you want to dance with me to-night stay where you are.'

The driver laughed again, but Jack Holland said, soothingly,

'Brunette's getting tired of the fun, Miss Wren, it's all against collar, she is calming down.'

Gradually, very gradually the pace steadied, and Bab landed herself and her friends safely at the front door. Miss Wren, with a deep breath of relief, and followed by Mr. Lascelles, went into the house.

Jack was to drive the cart round to the stables, Bab stood looking at the ripped seams of her gloves by the light of the carriage-lamp.

'She has a mouth like a saw, Jack,' she said, admitting the obvious fact with her inevitable frankness, though reluctantly.

'Did you feel those kicks at the lodge? They weren't play, they were vicious. The cart's low; it is not safe.'

'I must drive her with a thicker kicking-strap.'

'If, for just once in a way, you will do as I wish, Bab, you won't drive her at all; she's bad-tempered, uncertain, unsafe. You had far better get rid of her.'

Bab, astonished, incredulous, looked up at his serious face.

'I like her,' she said, as though no more needed saying, as though these three words would conclude the whole matter.

'Yes, but you might like her successor even more. Can't you be satisfied with the pleasure of having maimed a dog? You don't particularly wish to kill yourself or your friends, or to shave such a thing, do you?'

Bab shrugged her shoulders, her laugh was not so spontaneous as usual.

'You should not kick a person who is down, Jack. She did get out of hand, but I had given her her head too much; it wasn't her fault.'

'If that blessed gate had not been open, Bab, what then? You thought it was shut, and so did I. Such a bit of luck doesn't happen twice.'

Bab patted Brunette's neck tenderly; the mare was getting very fidgety over the prolonged and unlooked-for delay.

'It was all my own stupid fault, Jack. Don't take that serious alarm of yours, and a cock-and-bull story about it to father. He is prejudiced against Brunette as it is; he did not choose her, so she is not perfect.'

She paused for an answer; none came.

'Nothing happened, Jack,' argumentatively.

'There was a tremendous uproar about the "*nothing*" at the lodge.'

'That is another kick; you harp on the dog—poor little thing!—but, Jack, don't say anything about it to father, he has such a tiresome trick of believing what you tell him: and I,'—for the second time—'I like Brunette.'

'And I, Bab, like you. I like you far better than to trust you to her. Pluck is an excellent thing, but it isn't pluck that allows itself to be driven by a horse. She drove us home; you know it.'

'Brunette and I are getting cross, Jack. We want to get to our respective stalls, but first of all we want you to be generous, not to tell of us.' Brunette was pawing the gravel, and her mistress was appealing to the weak-minded young man in the cart, to whom it was impossible that she should appeal in vain.

'Go to your stall,' he said, gathering up the reins and 'clicking' softly. 'The story is *not* cock-and-bull, but I'll hold my tongue about it. It is very bad for you, Queen Bab; you are like this mare of yours, you always get your head.'

No gas, no electric light was to be had at Combe, but Miss Fenwick's pretty green and white bedroom was ablaze with candles. She stood between mirrors with a victimized expression on her face, for she was being laced into a ball-dress which was an inch or so, only an inch or so, too small in the waist.

The bracing was, Rawle declared, exactly what this maize silk bodice wanted, and she was firm with her resisting mistress.

'It will give, miss, presently. If you let the waist go with so much poppy wreathing you'd look thick ; you would, indeed.'

In the mirror Bab's reflection was slim as a fir-tree ; there seemed no need to be apprehensive of such calamity as thickness. She was about to say so when Becket, carrying a large, square wooden box, the look of which is well known to some women, walked into the room.

'From Mr. Holland,' she said, 'yellow roses such as would turn an attic into a palace. I came to scold you, miss ; but there, how can I, when I see you looking like a rose yourself ? Oh dear, oh dear ! how came you to run over that poor puppy dog, miss ? It can't so much as stand ; and to see the children crying for pity, and breaking their little hearts did put me about. But there, Miss Bab, you are not to blame, you couldn't help it, coming round the corner ten thousand miles an hour, as you did. I said so to Mr. Holland. A kind-hearted young gentleman he is. I met him on the drive going down his own self to see what was the matter ; so concerned as though 'twas a child hurt, not a dog. But don't you worry ; 'twas only the paw after all, and 'twasn't no fault of yours, but just an accident. There, Rawle, let that poppy lie against her shoulder ; there isn't such another skin in the county. You are as handsome as ever your mother was, and finer grown, that you are. I'll take out your bouquet. Do look here, Rawle, all yellow, Allan Richardsons, smelling like violets. You are a lucky young lady !'

Lucky actors are they who play small parts to continual rounds of applause. Where every spectator claps there can be no question of success.

Miss Fenwick sailed down to the drawing-room with her usual unconscious sovereignty. Jack was late, he only came in as dinner was announced, then she held up her flowers towards him, smiling her thanks. He was

seated far from her end of the table, he could not catch any of her continual conversation ; she was the leading spirit amongst her noisy neighbours, and very fair to see.

An ache in a paw or a heart—which hurt the most ? The pain that might be howled into the ears of the offender, or the pain which was dumb ?

‘Mr. Holland, do you think that poor little dog was much hurt ?’ Miss Wren was beside him, asking this question. ‘It yelped so, I can’t forget it ; I hope it wasn’t killed. Miss Fenwick is so used to killing ; she’s strong-minded, but I’m not. I hate hurting anything ; I can’t help it, but I do.’

‘Don’t try to help it ; it isn’t a trait for which you need apologize.’

Miss Wren thought Jack was quite a dear man, and not so dreadfully in love with Miss Fenwick after all.

‘It would be so nice not to care,’ simply. ‘I’ve thought of nothing else, poor dog.’

‘There wasn’t much damage done. I had a look at the paw that was hurt ; it was crushed, not smashed, and it is curable.’

Then he talked of something else, and talked a great deal, doing his duty to his hostess. For an empty chair is better than a silent guest.

CHAPTER IX.

If mirth, youth’s playmate, feels fatigue
Too soon on life’s long way,
At least he’ll run with you a league ;
Laugh on, laugh on to-day.—PRAED.

‘Garlands are not for every brow.’

Il faut souffrir pour être belle, and the young girls, the *débutantes* of the Combe party, suffered many things during the weary, outward drive. Old Mrs. Kaufmann

—she was *old*—was a voracious person, with her patter of small-talk and her genius for laughter ; she frisked and whisked up such frivolity as lay latent amongst the mankind, and kept it circulating round her. Already she had helped herself to their preference, and was rapidly annexing the roomy, roving affections of Mr. Lascelles. She, who was Miss Fenwick's aunt, and, consequently, old enough to be a grandmother—she, who had a husband and money and diamonds—what more could she want of men ? Selfish old thing !

The girls, pale with excitement, sat rigid and bolt upright, careful for the trimness of their crimped heads, cautious for the freshness of their billowy frocks. With their big, brilliant eyes shining and anxious in the dusky light, they pursued pleasure with the old and wise, casting childhood's follies behind them.

Miss Fenwick was not afraid of the sound of her own voice, she had no fears concerning the ball, she should get as good a time as she had a mind for, there was no chance of her disgracing the family by standing unchosen beside a frowning chaperon, she had no fear for her hair or for her skirts. She was debonair as usual. Bab never put on anything with her clothes as her sex so often does, she was just the same sort of person in a ball-dress as in a dressing-gown, her individuality was marked, monotonous, she had no variations of mood or manner. She was perfectly natural, and naturally immutable.

Beside her father, far off from the lady of his love, Jack Holland was seated. He did not join much in the general conversation which was led by Mrs. Kaufmann, but talked incessantly to his *vis-à-vis* Mrs. Fenwick. Once or twice Queen Bab addressed him from her side of the 'bus, appealing to him to back her opinion, or for reference. The air was filled with the scent of his roses, towards which she now and again bent her face,

When the wheels of the 'bus, leaving the soft tenacious mud of the Devon roads, began to clatter past houses and by lamps, Bab's practical mind flew at once to the business part of the night's revelry, and, leaning forward, again she addressed him.

'Jack, we are rather late, the place will be crowded ; if we get divided, I mayn't come across you again till all my dances are gone.'

'Bab, you are very bold ; do you want to book him here, poor fellow, when he hasn't a chance of getting out of it ? I blush for you.'

'Don't interfere, Jim, you may not understand that Jack expects all the women he knows to keep their programmes blank, till he has done the civil to the dear dowagers he loves.'

'I remember the days when Jack filled his card to the hilt before the first dance,' said Mrs. Kaufmann, smiling indulgently at the young man. 'Yes, Jack, you were as keen not to miss one moment of the fun as the other little boys ; and I've danced Sir Roger with you in my time. You were in Eton jackets then, and cared for nothing but ices. Ah, Bab, but he is grown so old and so grand, and I am not one of his dear dowagers, he never gets me my tea.'

'He doesn't jump at your offer, Bab,' said her cousin. 'I say, Holland, does she fasten on any chap who can dance, and forget to leave him until she is forcibly removed ? That is the kind of thing Bab would do, she has no preferences, she doesn't like trouble, and she loves dancing.'

'She has never fastened on me,' said Jack ; he had still his boyish habit, which Mrs. Fenwick and her sister knew so well, of looking his interrogator straight in the face. His eyes were clear and ardent, he had a quick way of speaking, though his voice was mellow and low-toned ; he wore his hair rather longer than the cropped

martial heads around him, his moustache was slight enough to show his well-cut mouth, and the mere flicker of a smile upon it. Mrs. Kaufmann inspected him leisurely and attentively, and with a shade of seriousness in her face.

‘One moment,’ said the conductor of the ‘bus, holding up his hands, ‘there is a part of the evening to which I can look forward, we shall return—it will be over at last. I have ordered the carriage at two. Do you all hear? Two o’clock. One, *two*. You can all count so far as *two*.’

‘I think that I can keep awake till two with some one to talk to me, even in Devon.’

The ‘bus was advancing in jerks, having joined in the string of carriages. The conductor who was in excellent spirits, marshalled the party into the entrance.

‘Look out, Jim, all people more than six feet high should look out for their heads. Don’t knock the ‘bus lamp over, we could have nothing humorous with burning oil just now. Lost your shoe, Miss Wren? So loose it slipped off? Very awkward. Cinderella clung to hers till the fun was over, but shed it then because it pinched, no doubt. Bab, are you going off without your roses? Here, here, take them yourself. Halloa, Hanley, how are you? Late, are we? Never mind, we shall have quite enough of it, bless you! Go and get hold of a few men, Jack, for the little girls Mary brought must dance everything; a blank on their programme is a stain on their escutcheon. There is Peel. Here, Peel, you are just the fellow I wanted. We have a charming girl with us from your part of the world. Miss Wren—Mr. Peel. What? You knew each other before? Lucky people. That’s right, Mary, she has gone off. Jack has got the other youngster, and there is Bab in the thick of it already. You come along up this way with me, and let’s see who’s here.’

Captain Fenwick and his wife made their way up the room towards the dais and the diamonds. He was full of that coveted social commodity 'go,' and Mary passed from one warm greeting to another, welcomed by all sorts and conditions of people.

No wonder she was popular, her blindness for defects reassured the modest, and her tongue was gentle as her manner; she was sympathetic, considerate, tolerant. She did not obtrude her advantages, people whose daughters were not 'successes' and whose husbands were not 'comfortable' did not feel the weight of her superior fate.

Every one said 'it was a capital ball,' there were some revellers who, doubtless, found it altogether capital.

Probably the youngsters were, with few exceptions, disappointed with their fun, their expectations had been prodigious, and then they had so lately grown out of the parties of their youth. Children's parties where the tired ones sit down and cry; where the unhappy ones weep to go home; where the angry ones quarrel, and where there is authority to which doubt or difficulty may appeal without disgrace.

Here they might be tired, homesick, angry or amazed, but they must keep a serene front and hold their tongues about it.

Under the blaze of light, all amongst the bunting, and the flowers, and the music, were envy, vexation of spirit, failure making their presence felt. Under good shirt-fronts, and beneath white bosoms aches, cuts, stabs, wounds remained hidden. The pluck which hid these great and small discomfitures was a very creditable part of the entertainment.

But upon Miss Fenwick's snowy breast lay nothing heavier than the poppy wreath and a string of pearls. She was getting all she had expected to get from the

ball. She had danced and was dancing like a dervish—save that she waltzed with no spiritual object.

Every time the band struck up the maize dress and the scarlet poppies revolved before the spectators, or trod the mazes of the Lancers. Bab never wasted her time in cool and shadowy places, 'sitting out.'

She looked for no especial swallow-tail. Most of the men with whom she trod her measures were very nice, she liked them all, and she was glad to find that Stanhope Peel was not offended with her. For she greeted him in a most friendly way, and when he asked her for a dance gave him the last she had, regretting that it was nothing better than the Lancers.

In this same set of Lancers Jack and Alethea chanced to be dancing; the former smiled a cynical small smile, thinking of those rejected addresses of a month back when he overheard her genial conversation.

'We ought to have got the *Pas de Quatre* together,' she was saying. 'I don't think we missed it once last year. I did not know you would be here, or I could have kept it.'

Under some circumstances a perfectly natural young person jars terribly and sets the teeth of *amour propre* on edge. Jack cast a keen glance at Mr. Peel's good-looking face, and found his sympathy was superfluous. Bab's partner was perfectly satisfied with that which he had been given;—fortunate, enviable man.

Jack was not having a nice evening, he loathed the night, deprecated his own loathing, hated himself altogether, and talked to his own weary little partner while his eyes were dazzled with the corn-field dress, which whirled and twirled in every arm but his.

The night had been danced into day, the hours were very small indeed when Mrs. Kaufmann came across the ball-room, and squeezed her laces and brocade into a vacant corner of the couch where Mrs. Fenwick was

seated. She was followed by her brother-in-law with whom she had been dancing.

'Here she is, Mary,' said he. 'Look after her, she wants it. Yes, Cicely, you may be, in fact you are equal to looking after a dozen old fogies of my standing, beside the regiment of little boys you collect as body-guard, but I've great faith in Mary's sobering influence. Mary, she has got poor Jim in tow.'

'Will you reverence my grey hairs, Godfray? I dye them, of course, but they are grey all the same.'

Mrs. Kaufmann was Mrs. Fenwick's junior, but only by seven years. During her girlhood she had shared the Fenwicks' home. From thence she had married, and the marriage had not been a success. Mr. Kaufmann's heart and soul were concentrated in his stables, riveted in quadrupeds, his bride cared nothing for the lower scale of creation. No child came to fasten her heart to her hearth, she was uncomfortably devoid of domestic taste. As chase of some sort was the fashion of the house, she took to the chase of bipeds, and at first was excellently well amused by the sport.

But such a pastime is about as wholesome, and about as easy to relinquish, as dram-drinking. She would not abandon her habit when Mary took her to task.

'I must have some amusement, scandal doesn't interest me, and it really isn't so harmless, Mary, an entertainment. Wrinkles will pull me up soon, I've a crop round my eyes, I shall have to stop laughing and take to massage.'

It was easy to laugh, Cicely had the knack of laughter. Mrs. Fenwick wanted more than the mere knack for this only sister of hers, wanted more than a mere scum of merriment floating on no sound basis of happiness, poor Cicely.

But pity was wasted on this brilliant woman who looked ridiculously young and was absolutely light-

hearted, and who was now dismissing Captain Fenwick and all other mankind, on purpose for a *tête-à-tête* with her half-disapproving, wholly anxious sister.

‘Go away, Godfray, the supper-room is not overcrowded ; we’ll follow you presently. Now, Mary, he is off, and there is nobody within earshot, so just tell me—what are Bab’s methods? Why is she tormenting Jack?’

‘Tormenting?’

‘Driving him mad, my dear. Is it deliberate wickedness? is it mere fun? or is it—heredity?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t turn pale, Mary, for I never mean quite so much as I say. I no longer lose my head or my discrimination at a ball ; I have kept my eye on those two. Jack is spending the evening with Alethea Young. Sometimes he has looked sulky, sometimes he has looked wicked ; he has had a wretched time of it.’

‘I saw Bab dancing with him.’

‘The *Pas de Quatre*, yes ; but that was all. Mary, does she like him?’

‘Of course, of course, she likes him very much indeed.’

‘My dear, I knew as far as that, but I want to know farther. Is she going straight to her execution?’

‘Hush, Cicely ; I don’t know.’

‘That means I am not to be inquisitive.’

‘It simply means that I have no notion what will happen.’

‘What is the matter with the girl? Who is her fancy-man?’

‘She has,’ with a faint sigh, ‘no fancies.’

‘No fancies. A Fenwick, a Manser, with no fancies? Where did she come from? Poor Jack, he must be having up-hill work. I was sorry for him ; he was riotously gay when we danced together. I saw through it. He was acting the old tragic comedy—the tragic

comedy which we, in the forties, know all about, and acting like a professional; he has had some practice, I'm afraid.'

Mrs. Fenwick nodded.

'Odd things men,' reflected the other; 'they only really want what they can't get; they are all alike, like as sheep. I beg your pardon, Mary; you have stiffened; Godfray, of course, has no peer. That reminds me, why not marry these two? Heredity again! Oh, yes, they must be married immediately; they can tussle it out afterwards. Do you remember how you tussled before you settled down?'

'Bab is not as I was.'

'You were as proud as Lucifer, Mary, and as impassioned as Sappho. She has, as you say, no fancies—but marry them.'

'You don't understand Jack; he would not marry her now.'

'Nonsense! give him a chance. It is dangerous, of course; but then all matrimony is dangerous. She won't quarrel with him; women never quarrel with a man unless they are interested in him. I remembered Goff and you, and I tried to quarrel with Oliver on our honeymoon. I suppose I didn't do it nicely, for he would not respond. He got bored and stayed at the club, and grumbled to his friends about my temper; our tiffs were a failure. If I quarrel with any one now, it is not with Oliver. Oh, dear, here is that nice gunner-boy making a dead point at me; it means supper, Mary, and an end to our *tête-à-tête*. It is sometimes a little tiring to frisk as a lamb, when I get a chance of bleating to you as the old sheep I am, and in an appropriate key. Your dance, Mr. Lascelles? So it is. Good-bye, Mary; here is Lady Young coming to attack me about my husband. How do you do, Lady Young? Capital ball, isn't it?'

Lady Young was in the habit of making excuses for Mrs. Kaufmann. She assured people that they need not be shy of the silly woman: she was her own enemy, not the enemy of mankind. Poor thing! she always talked so much and told stories, with herself as heroine, trying to make out that she was an amusing person. As her odd groom husband did not mind her giddiness, neither would Lady Young take exception to it. This was charitable, and Lady Young's regal robe creaked over the greeting which its owner bestowed upon Cicely.

'I saw you in the distance dancing away; it was like old times to see you, it took me back twenty years at least. You are indeed an evergreen. And where is Mr. Kaufmann? Shirked the dance, no doubt?'

'I can't localize my husband at this moment. Last week he was in Warwickshire, down with influenza, poor man! I escaped at once, knowing what a sick man means.'

'Influenza!' from Mrs. Fenwick, startled. 'You did not tell me, Cicely.'

'Oh, did I not? Well, influenza is like cholera, the less one talks of it the more placid one remains.—Yes, yes, Mr. Lascelles, I am coming.'

Two o'clock had struck; the room was thinning fast. The musicians were not the only people who were longing for rest and anticipating 'God save the Queen' eagerly; they were not the only people who had found the night long, hot, and hard; but they had earned wage and would have something to show for their labour.

Jack had seen his people into their carriage. He had received some specially disturbing last words from his mother; he had walked back strolling under the lights, between the pots of dying flowers, treading the red carpet softly, halting at last to stand with folded arms at the ball-room door.

Plenty of couples still whirled to the strains of a waltz. The maize-satin dress got over the ground at amazing pace. Bab danced well ; there was a graceful, steady swing in her movements, and she laughed and talked as she went, feeling no need to store her breath. She was fresh and untired ; nothing about her bore token of revelry, save the jagged little ribbons which fringed her skirt as they swooped round and round, skimming the vibrating boards.

He watched her ; he was so sore at heart, so chafed and fretted that he—he, Jack Holland, scrutinized her.

Hope, hundred-lived hope, fell sick and languished ; in its vacant place a monster put in an appearance—a candid monster, who showed Jack a bunch of faded roses in the grate, and called the donor ‘a fool,’ straight out to his face.

Proud of an enervating, useless passion, content to give without receiving, hugging a sentiment, loving a chimera ? If Jack had any self-respect, the monster argued, he would shake himself free of his folly, he would be quit of an allegiance the wage of which was a sore heart—a sore and angry heart.

It was an old story, the monster quite understood that Jack, as a lonely boy, had been fond and foolish about the child Bab, who had taken the place of his dead sister in his life ; he quite understood that Bab in socks and sash, in curls and coral, might have been a nice child. He quite understood that even when Miss Fenwick had attained a riotous, long-legged, hobbledehoy age, Jack had tied himself to the strings of her Liberty smocks. He quite understood that Jack had been a school-room courtier who had baited Bab’s hooks, blown her doubtful eggs, stuck in her stamps, written her exercises, and beaten her tables into her brain.

The monster quite understood that Jack had been getting worse and worse in his infatuation and folly for

years. But it was never too late to mend, it was not as yet too late to change.

Then Jack turned upon the monster and called him Self, not Reason, defending Miss Fenwick against the accuser.

Change! Why should he change? Certainly not.

She had forgotten him and his dances. Why should she remember an exacting, unattractive person who was unworthy to touch her satin shoe? Who grudged her her innocent, frank happiness? who was angry because she had not buffeted the dancing world with a trophy of flowers, but had modestly deposited them upon the ground?

At this juncture of his reflections, Bab saw him; the next moment she and her partner, Mr. Lascelles, had halted beside him.

'Jack,' she said, 'we,' indicating her cousin, 'don't want to go yet. We must stay over the galop. Father has gone to look for you; don't be *found*. Oh, what a nuisance! the music is stopping. Here come father and Aunt Cis full cry. F'rard, Jim; stop them. Dance with her—keep her.'

Jack found himself held by the arm, and pioneered through the crowd that was surging supperwards. He allowed himself to be scurried off, helter-skelter, up the staircase to a curtained alcove near the sky; he followed his leader right willingly.

Many a time this couple had hidden from the authorities together, many a time had Bab rushed him off in this sort of manner, laughing and twittering all the way she went. Breathless they sat down side by side on the window-seat within the shadowed nook, and looked into each other's faces and laughed.

Forthwith the monster and his arguments were forgotten. Alert, at the fag-end of a ball, brilliantly lively in the dim light, cool in the stifling heat, whole-

some as a moorland breeze, Bab sat at his elbow and smiled upon him.

And he had been blaspheming her in his heart. He was ready to turn up his nose at a love-sick Queen Bab, and to prefer a lady unimpressible as a billiard-ball.

'We must wait,' she was saying, 'till the music has begun. We shall hear it up here. I hate leaving before it's all over. I must get the galop in; father can have another supper, and the horses won't hurt—it is a warm night.'

'Will you dance it with me?'

'The galop?'

'Yes.'

'I can't; I'm engaged.'

'Out of twenty odd dances you gave me one.'

'It was a very nice one.'

'Short commons, Bab.'

'Yes, but why did you go off with that girl? You didn't come near me till so late. I'd asked you, Jack, to book your dances early. You forgot and so did I.'

'I didn't forget, I came directly I could get away, but I had a sort of idea, a kind of insane hope that you would keep me what I wanted. Your father got hold of me before I was inside the place, he wanted me to look after some of the people. So I had the girl on my hands, she knew no one. I did my duty; if you'd done yours, Bab, you'd have danced a bit oftener with me.'

'I know such a lot of men, you see, Jack. I'm full up before I get into the room sometimes. It was a capital ball.'

'Capital, if you enjoyed it, but I—I don't remember much about it except that you had no time to waste on me, and that for the life of me I could see no one, think of no one, care for no one but you.'

Miss Fenwick left off twittering; when Jack got demonstrative she grew constrained and uneasy.

'I hear the music, in a moment we must go.'

'It is my dance.'

'I never,' patting her foot to the music, 'cut any one out, it is such bad form.'

'It's too late in the programme to be precise, and if you are engaged to any one, you are, if you will remember, chiefly engaged to me.'

'I dare say,' civilly, 'Mr. Whose-his-name will have gone, then I can have it with you.'

Toot, toot, toot, the horn in the 'Post-boy's Galop' sounded far off, but not the less inspiring on that account.

'Mr. Whose-his-name has gone, Bab, he is certain to have gone, and I want to sit it out. Have you never heard of such a thing as sitting out at a ball?'

She got up, laughing.

'I can sit out with you at Combe, Jack, at intervals, for the rest of my life, but it would be silly to waste this galop.'

'I am silly, Bab.'

'Yes, but silliness will keep.'

'It will, it lasts me like the cruise of oil. Do you really want to dance this badly?'

She hummed a bar, nodding her head. Of course he would come, and he did. At the foot of the stairs her partner, Mr. Whose-his-name, was waiting for her; in his accomplished arms Miss Fenwick chased the 'Post-boy's Galop' to the finish, to the bitter end.

CHAPTER X.

Be patient, for the world is broad and wide.

Romeo and Juliet.

'Of a little, take a little.'

THE fun was over, and the weary cargo in the 'bus rolled homeward, chewing according to their several

experiences the tasteless or poignant, the sweet or bitter, the stimulating or enervating cud of the night's revel.

The prettiest *débutante* sat still as a cloud, silent as the Sphinx, her programme rocking softly beneath the tucker of her dress, waiting the inevitable moment when it should be honourably entombed as a sainted relic of man. Its owner chewed a poignantly-sweet cud, and wished the drive to Combe double its length.

In scraps upon the cloak-room floor Miss Wren's dishonoured programme lay; the only hieroglyphic in the world had not been scrawled upon it, the one man in the world was at her side but not aware of his situation. If this was the sort of evening a grown woman was compelled to pretend to relish, then Miss Wren wished herself back in the nursery and out of reach of social snubs. Much heart-burning as well as exultation was carted home with its owners.

The Devon roads are not as smooth as billiard-tables, in the autumn of the year tons of formidable flint stones are strewn with generous impartiality about the lanes and highways. Bab chewed no cud, she talked and laughed for the first ten minutes of the journey, yawning, now and again, short, sharp, energetic yawns which disturbed her neighbours' remarks. Soon she grew silent, the jolting and jarring of the carriage rocked her to drowsiness. Her slumbers wanted no delicate courting. Inch by inch, little by little, her head edged to the right, sinking lower and lower, descending more and more until it reached a comfortable resting-place upon her neighbour's shoulder.

She was fast asleep, and her cousin, upon whose unappreciative shoulder the brown head was bolstered, grumbled about his honours to every one, though he had not the heart, he said, to disturb her.

'Nothing would rouse her but a cold pig; she is sweetly, and I might whisper, heavily asleep.'

A reverent mind was outraged by this blasphemy, and had not recovered its balance when the 'bus drew up at the porch of home, and the sharp air, blowing through the opened door, aroused this young sleeper of Ephesus.

'Hulloa,' opening her eyes, 'where are we? Oh,' drawling and sleepy, 'we have got back. I could have slept for a month.'

'I'm glad you are quite at home,' said Mr. Lascolles.

Then she laughed, and sitting up in a hurry, asked Jack, who was not looking at all amused by the incident, whether her faculty for sleep was not a disgrace?

'A faculty for getting what one wants is an enviable faculty.' He was lighting her candle for her, and he spoke more as a 'busy mocker' than a flatterer.

'Shall I cultivate insomnia? No, thanks, I want nothing at all. Give me my candle. Let me escape. I don't want those girls in my room, talking everything threadbare; I hate my sex's habit of "talking-over."'

She toiled slowly up the staircase out of sight, her hair battered on one side, her dress frayed and soiled, her attitude languid. He watched her until she turned the corner of the flight. He watched a queen whom it was impossible to dethrone.

Even the *débutante* had done devouring her programme, even the forsaken damsel had got quit of her miseries in sleep, but still Jack lingered on down-stairs. His thoughts were not as luxurious as the chair in which he lounged, they were not thin, light, easily dispelled as the curly clouds of smoke which puffed intermittently from his pipe, but they were of the self-same colour as the other clouds, they were blue.

From the solitariness of his life, from its lack of home-ties, Jack had had an isolated youth, and he had, consequently, grown to be a dreamer of dreams, a somewhat egotistical dreamer.

Save for this adopted home of his he had had no

close tie, he had had no one to consider but himself, none of the corners and angles of his nature had been rubbed off in the friction of family life.

Happy-go-lucky people who fit themselves into their nook of existence, tobogganning over the smooth and trudging through the rough, had nothing akin to Jack. The take-what-comes, the comfortable make-the-best-of-it people had nothing akin to Jack.

He planned out his future, he made provident, precise, exact schemes of existence, his life was to be beautiful, full, straight, useful; he dreamed of matrimony as it has been dreamed of before by visionary men and maidens. Of the perfect whole, of the twain with one mind, one will, one flesh. It was a specious vision, had not implacable Fate fixed on Bab as an essential half of the divine whole.

Bab did not dream on the subject, with an impartial eye she looked ahead. Marriage was a give and take, a bear and forbear institution wherein wise couples ducked heads to avoid collision, foregoing discussion. She had no prejudice against matrimony, she was vexed when, obviously, she had been wooed for her shekels, but she must marry somebody, and Jack Holland was handy, he was nice, he was her oldest friend, she liked him very much, she would marry him.

Hitherto she had had no giving, no forbearing, no ducking to do, Jack had done all that; no wonder her view of the future seemed plausible and comfortable enough.

The monster came swiftly into the smoking-room and sat beside Jack, making all these kind of disturbing suggestions to him, and arguing fiercely; the fire sank and the clock ticked off an hour or two, whilst Jack defended the lady of his choice against her calumniator.

Bab, heartless? Bab, hard-hearted? Bab, to blame? He who made such accusations must have been mad,

for when at length Jack extinguished the lamp, and, taking his candle in his hand, went out into the shadowy hall on his way to bed, there met him a rival candle shining in the dusk, and a rival watcher, heavy-eyed and heavy-hearted, looked him in the face.

‘Bab!’

The monster had declared her to be asleep, oblivious to every ill and shock which flesh is heir to, yet now she encountered Jack her face agitated, wide-awake, troubled; the wisdom of the monster was, for the second time, defeated.

‘Bab darling.’

‘I wish I’d known you were up, Jack,’ said his darling, drearily.

‘Did you want me?’

‘Yes, I wanted some one.’

‘Why? What is the matter?’

‘I wanted help.’

‘Help? Help for what?’

Something serious had happened. Bab’s voice broke as she explained.

‘Venom is ill, Jack, awfully ill. She had a fit just when we came home, she has had another since. Rawle was no good, I sent her to bed, and I’ve been all alone with the poor old dog in the kitchen. There are such a lot of beetles, and Venom is getting worse all the time.’

It was a tragedy indeed! Jack had a tender spot in his heart for the cute old terrier, which had lived out her full span of life at Combe.

‘I will come and have a look at her,’ he said, much concerned.

‘I was on my way to fetch father. Surely something can be done. Poor old thing!’ with unsteady lips; ‘she is hardly breathing at all.’

Down the chill passage, whence she had come, Bab

led the way to the kitchen. A red-hot fire burnt in the grate and glowed upon a basket upon the hearth, within which lay the terrier. Jack put the candles down upon the dresser, and then he knelt on the flags beside poor Venom, and looked at her without speaking: there was a sunken grey look of death about her grizzled, scarred face. Bab must know what that look meant.

'I brought her here because the fire was so warm and she is so cold, Jack. I have rubbed her with hot flannels. I have poured some brandy down her throat. Nothing did any good.'

'Did you try a wet sponge on her head?'

'No, I didn't. I will go and get one now.'

Jack shook his head; he had laid his hand on Venom's faintly-beating heart.

'It's no use to torment her with remedies. Let her alone, Bab. She is not going to get any better, I am afraid.'

But Bab was a young person who never said 'die.' Moreover, she could not wait inert and watch a harrowing scene, she must do something.

'Why should she die, Jack?'

'Look at her.'

'Yes, yes, I am looking, but she is a tough old dog, she might pull through. Don't you remember when she got jammed between a root in a fox's earth, and couldn't struggle out till she had shrunk on a week of starvation? Don't you remember that we found her crawling into the porch, with ribs like a bird-cage, half dead? You thought she would die then, but she didn't. We got her round on Liebig and cream. She has such an excellent constitution. Don't,' imploringly, 'don't give her up.'

'But, dearest, she is old. She is fifteen if she is a day.'

'Fifteen!' huskily. 'What is fifteen? Isn't it cruel

that fifteen is old for a dog when a stupid fish, that no one cares a straw about, should live a century, and take twenty years growing up.'

She leaned her cheek against the dog's grizzled nozzle, and looked up into Jack's face. Indeed, he thought any law of nature barbarous that should make her 'little finger ache,' at any time. Here, among the dish-covers and black-beetles, kneeling on the flags by the scrubbed tables, she was divine. As a ministering angel she gave her orders.

'Jack,' she said, 'do try the sponge; fetch yours, there isn't one here.'

In a small way it would have been hard for a courtier to better serve his liege than by such a service. This courtier took his candle and hurried off to his room; it was a sacrifice for a forlorn hope.

He was not two minutes gone; howbeit, when he came back from his quest with his hands full and his breath short, he came too late.

Bab still knelt, as she had done when he left her, by the terrier; but she did not speak; she only pointed to the basket.

'It is no good, Bab, she is dead.'

With averted face and bent head, with a pigtail of hair hanging over her loose, white wrapper, with the glow of the fire upon her, over her head burnished brass and tin, his imperial lady knelt on in silence. He set his candle and his sponge upon the table, and went over to her side; then she rose to her feet and put her hand into his, staring into his face with troubled eyes.

'I—I wish dogs lived for—for ever. I—I wish I had not been so fond of Venom.'

'Poor old thing! It is hard lines, Bab, but she had to die some time, you know. She might have grown wheezy and old, and then people would have got sick of her; it's better to die when she was appreciated.'

Bab had no faculty for philosophizing. Resignation had never entered into her scheme of existence. She had no experience of evils where it is necessary to accept one, and expedient to choose the lesser.

'I would rather that I had grown sick of her, Jack; but I am sure I never should have, I never got tired of any dog. I don't change.'

'No, Bab, I know you don't.'

'I never knew her miss a rat, Jack.'

Ratting was not an accomplishment which appealed to the young man, but the break in her voice went straight to his heart, and vibrated upon its strings.

'She was the cutest, most faithful dog in the world,' he said fervently, with his eyes in the basket by which they stood together; then, in the hushed tones of bereavement, they talked, recalling the virtues of the dead.

Though quicksilver was a dominant part of Bab's composition, she was not restless now. The great, white face of the clock looked down upon them and ticked loudly, suggestively; the beetles were going home for a quiet day; the fire waned; and yet she lingered by poor Venom's side.

In her grief, in her confidential, appealing sorrow Bab 'had grown so dear, so dear,' that her comrade left the virtues of the dead for the virtues of the living.

He told her of the monster and his blasphemy; he told her that he had, at the monster's suggestion, suspected her. He told her that he, Jack Holland, was a selfish, exacting, despotic monster himself, who could not rest without her forgiveness.

'Nonsense!' she said, graciously, but looking now towards the clock.

He talked of their future life; of the good things they would do; of the glorious certainty of their infinite happiness in an existence which they would spend in

righting wrongs, in soothing suffering, in steadfast work, in honest pleasure.

He talked as a man may, on a rare occasion, talk to the woman he loves. He told all his dreams out loud—bewildering her, confusing her, confounding her.

Then he talked of her—of Bab, herself, in the same wild way, with the same extravagance. Here she pulled him up: she knew where she was—he had told her this sort of fairy-tale before. She did not know anything about their future life, therefore she could not gainsay his prophecies; but she was quite certain that her origin was not divine, she was quite certain she was an ordinary mortal who was out of place on a pedestal.

‘It is half-past five, Jack,’ she said, pointing at the clock; ‘the kitchen-maid will be down in a minute. I must go.’ She took up her candle and turned from the corpse. ‘You look tired, Jack.’

‘Tired!’ he repeated; ‘tired with *you*!’

‘How odd the hall looks by this light!’

‘You need not run; I am not going to say any more, Bab.’

She relaxed her pace, she was pale and pensive. At the door of her room she paused to wish him good-night.

‘Have her buried in my garden, Jack. I shan’t get up early. Good-night; you have been so kind. Good-night.’

CHAPTER XI.

Sitting by my side,
At my feet,
So he breathed the air I breathed,
Satisfied!—R. BROWNING.

‘Qui capit capitur.’

UPON the day following the October ball the weather was contemptible. All the morning it tried to rain;

though the attempt was unsuccessful, it was sufficient to unsettle every one's mind as to 'doing' and 'wearing.'

The deserted womenkind at Combe had not philosophy sufficient to make them independent of the weather. Without the stimulating presence of the men the jaded girls drooped, that peculiar washed-out, light-headed, all-is-vanity sensation, the discomfiting speciality of ball-goers, drained them of their spirits; they were flat, dull, dismal.

'Take them to the Hanleys' hockey-party, for goodness' sake; take them to luncheon, as you were asked to do,' Mrs. Kaufmann urged. 'I hate young girls, Mary; they are so——natural; I nearly said selfish, but it's the same thing, isn't it?'

'We are going; I've ordered the carriage.'

'Where's Bab?'

The daughter of the house, who had not learned to droop or repine under any circumstance, was still asleep; no one disturbed her, she washed her hands of entertaining; she was not going to do anything save sleep till lunch-time. Nothing had been seen of Mr. Holland that morning, but he had not gone to shoot at Croxton, for Mrs. Kaufmann had smelt him out in the smoking-room, and, pursuing him thither, had pressed him to play billiards with the poor dear girls, a privilege which he had been ungallant enough to decline. Later he had altogether disappeared, and when the landau started for Burton he was not within doors.

But two o'clock found him in the dining-room, discussing a delectable salmi and some not wholly delectable thoughts; his eyes wandered continually to the door, he was listening as a dog listens for its absent master's steps. Footsteps came before long, quick and sharp, with a pattering accompaniment of paws on a parquet floor. A moment later Miss Fenwick, Dan and Fritz preceding her, entered the room. Nothing could be

fresher nor more blithe than the incomer. No trace of her vigil was to be seen in her face, nor heard in her voice; neither vigil nor weather affected her.

She passed Jack, tapping him a friendly 'Good-morning' on the shoulder, and sat herself down at the head of the table, facing the light.

Her eyes were not heavy, her cheeks were rosy as Aurora, she had slept off every trace of revelling, and she looked with critical interest upon Jack's plate.

'Is that good, Jack?' she asked. 'Give me some.'

As he waited upon her she laughed, and quoted a rhyme, teasing him—

“We can live without books,
What is knowledge but grieving?
We can live without hope,
What is hope but deceiving?
We can live without love,
What is passion but pining?
But where is the man
That can live without dining?”

And lunching, Jack,' in parenthesis. 'But you are not one of the men who say "they never touch anything in the middle of the day," and then eat tons of everything they can get at one o'clock. Men think it's a smart theory, that "glass of claret and a biscuit" theory, but they don't like it in practice.'

Bab looked up laughing, it struck her that Jack's smile was an inspiring one with which to meet. It struck her that she liked to see his face opposite to her; though, alas, neither immaculate breeches and gaiters, neither broad, square shoulders nor rough frieze coat, neither one nor other, nor all, contrived to turn Jack (within or without) into that species of man which Bab appreciated, a genuine sportsman. Bab's eyes were not intelligent, discriminating, they were superficial servants. She knew no more of the lust of the eye than she knew

of the lust of the flesh, but of the pride of life she had her full share.

Jack's thin, pale face which was neither tanned nor reddened, his light jaw, and finely-cut features, his deep, intelligent eyes, and his thick, over-long hair had no touch in common with the stalwart Fenwick ancestry, who, in oil and canvas, looked down from the walls upon the comely couple at their lunch.

With a quick, imperious gesture, Bab dismissed the well-trained dogs from the exciting proximity of scraps. Offering no remonstrance, save a dumb one in their eyes, they lay down on the rug. Dumb entreaties are thrown away on humanity.

'How long have you been up, Jack?'

'Since nine o'clock yesterday morning.'

'W-h-a-t?'

'I couldn't go to bed in broad daylight, I can't sleep at odd hours. I had my tub and went out for a potter.'

He had, in truth, pottered idly up and down that portion of the garden which commanded a near view of a certain curtained window, until he had been driven from offering that unprofitable homage to a shrine by the greeting of the gardener.

Bab looked hard at him.

'You will be cross before this long, long day is over, I expect: you are tired now. I told Rawle to wake me at one. I slept till then, so I'm as fresh as paint. Becket says it's going to rain.' She lifted her head, and, looking through the window, swept the grey panorama of valley, hills, and woods with a long, keen glance.

'What's it going to do?'

'Pelt,' laconically.

'“The mist comes from sea to hill,
There'll be enough to turn a mill.”'

'Are you coming to Burton?'

'It's a nasty day.'

'Yes, but it's something to do ; the cart will be round directly.'

'Of course I will come ;' he looked at her cap, skirt, and cape of uncompromising waterproof : it was grimly practical, but distasteful clothing : such apparel as a man approves his wife for wearing, but deprecates for less favoured women. 'You look prepared for a flood. What will you have now ? Apricot-cream or *foie-gras* ?'

'Both,' she laughed, 'in rotation. I'm so hungry, for I've lost my breakfast. What have you been doing with yourself since last I saw you ?'

'Funeral rites, Bab.'

'Why did you remind me ? I'd been studiously forgetting.'

'It isn't decent to forget till after the funeral, even in dog-land. But she's buried. She has done her last duty and filled her grave. Poor Venom ! I had her put in your garden, Bab, with a rose-tree at her head and a clump of columbines at her foot,—her tail, I should say,—so forget her as soon as you can ; she's out of sight.'

If there was displeasure in his voice, Bab did not notice it ; but she did notice that he tossed a bit of toast to the collie.

'I don't like your feeding Dan,' she remonstrated ; the *don't like* in that tone was equivalent to *won't have*. 'Dogs which beg at meals are a pest.'

Bab ruled the dogs justly, but as spoilt women are given to govern their subordinates, with absolute monarchy.

'Don't be a despot, Bab. Let the poor old chap get what he likes for once in a way. He will be alongside of Venom in a year or two. Then there will be no catching of toast in uncanonical hours. No wanting and no having. No laws of Medes and Persians, and no lawgivers.'

'There may be Home-Rule in the Dog-Star, Jack. At any rate, there will be anarchy nowhere, if what you teach me is true.'

She slowly tossed a crumb of biscuit to the wondering Dan ; her eyes on her *vis-à-vis's* exultant face.

'I think,' reflectively, 'you will make a good barrister, you have a knack of convincing me.' Another biscuit demoralized the dogs. Jack felt as a man might feel who has made his name, and gained a case of world-wide fame ; but he felt thus only for a minute. 'I am easy to convince,' she proceeded ; 'when people argue with me, I always think as they think just at first, or until I hear a contrary opinion.'

At three o'clock the rain and the T-cart came together.

'It is a sea-fret, a mist, a mere nothing,' said Miss Fenwick, standing at the front door to scan the dreariness without. The magnificent view for which Combe was famed, had been reduced to a dozen acres of damp grass-land, dotted with a dripping walnut-tree and a weeping ash ; hills and woods were alike clouded out of the scene.

The air was like soft, warm, human breath. It was such a day as the natives call 'nice, growing weather.' Bab had been bred and born in this atmosphere of visible vapour. As the ferns and the moss, she flourished in and appreciated it. Brunette was somewhat sobered by the downpour. Though her impatient hoofs imprinted a score of uneven horse-shoes upon the reeking gravel, she made no other sign of her individuality.

'I will drive,' said Jack ; his mackintosh was turned up to his ears, his hat pulled well over his eyes ; 'you had better try to keep dry. Oh, yes, take an umbrella, Bab ; you don't want to wring water out of your fringe when you get there.'

'I hate being driven,' she grumbled, 'but I must

keep fairly dry, or I shan't be fit to be seen. Coming back I can drive.'

So Jack got up into the T-cart and took his high and perilous seat. This cart was Bab's own property, chosen for its colour, height, the lightness of its wheels, its smartness, not for comfort nor convenience; there was barely room in it for a brace of full-sized people.

The drive was not such an excursion into Paradise as one imagination had foreseen; it had its drawbacks. Brunette absorbed much of the driver's attention, and Bab's umbrella spiked him on the cheek and in the eye several times, while Bab herself gave him advice and admonitions about the mare.

'She is not safe for you to drive alone,' he said. This remark was not pleasing to a young person who prided herself upon her skill with the reins. 'This cart doesn't give her enough work to take the nonsense out of her.'

'It's only play; Brunette's no vice about her, Jack.'

'You have heard of the dealer who was kicked by the horse he was selling, and died murmuring, "playful little rogue!" Consistent man that, a faithful friend.'

'Hush, Jack, don't argue again; I don't like you when you argue.'

Jack looked at her, not answering.

'His face with lines of firmness wrought,
He wears the look of a man unbought,
The face that a child would climb to kiss,
True and tender and brave and just,
That man might honour and woman trust.'

But she saw nothing more about his face than the rain wet on his cheeks, his drenched moustache, the dripping from his hat.

'Hurry her along, Jack, it's pouring cats and dogs. The rain's trickling down my neck. I want to get out of it.'

Hockey in a hall is a nice game for those who like bruises, and do not mind a noise. The campaign at Burton was great fun for people of these latter tastes. Bab liked it, she whacked and pushed, and backed and shrieked in an even more fiery state of vicious endeavour than her compeers. The game was worth the discomfort of the drive, and so she said graciously to her hostess. Alethea, early lamed, disappeared with Mrs. Kaufmann in search of rest and peace. They found each other poor company, for when two great talkers meet then comes a tug-of-war. Lady Young hemmed Mrs. Fenwick in one of the window-seats, and penned her down with chit-chat ; while the great lady's son whacked lazily at the petticoat-guarded ball, backing up Miss Fenwick's energetic play, desiring most of all the end of the game.

The skies wept without, within was clattering of quick feet, ripples of laughter, the hum and buzz of voices rejoicing at the worship of the British deity, a ball.

The putting away of childish things is a clearance that takes some people half a century to accomplish. Bab, on her homeward way, behaved like a child ; she forgot the dignity of her years, and disgraced herself.

When the hockey and the tea, in fact when the fun was over, carriages were announced, and there arose the bustle of last words and leave-takings.

'I'm going to drive you back,' said Bab, addressing Jack ; she was fastening her cape and peering through the open door at the darkness without.

'It's raining buckets-full. I think,' said her careful squire, 'that you had better squeeze in with the others.'

'Five in the landau? No, thanks. I want a blow, my head is buzzy after the ball.'

She only wanted a blow ; she would get that, for the wind was high and gusty.

'Bab,' called her mother from the background, 'you must drive home with us. You will be wet through. You will be washed out of the cart.'

But Bab took her way; she wanted air, and did not object to being wet or washed, and she proceeded to descend the steps towards her equipage which stopped the way. Jack stayed behind to reassure Mrs. Fenwick. In the midst of his protestations he stammered, reddened, and disappeared; the elder Mary Fenwick was laughing at him, her eyes were twinkling.

'It is all right, Bab,' he said, joining that young person at the door. 'You can come; but I have promised to wrap you up and to drive you.'

'You shouldn't make rash promises.'

There were a couple of extraneous men seeing Bab off; she had taken the reins and the box-seat, and her attendants were tucking the apron round about her knees.

'Move to the other place; I'm going to drive.'

'But why?'

'You must keep dry.'

Brunette had no patience such as is necessary for a debate. If her cargo was aboard she intended to get home with them speedily, and she plunged forward. The cargo had a will of its own, and checked the start; this annoyed Brunette, she reared on end, remonstrating at the delay with her hoofs.

'You had better be off, Miss Fenwick; you can fight for the reins with Holland on the way. Just now you are obstructing the course.'

So Miss Fenwick moved to her legitimate seat as had been suggested, and out into pelting rain, under dripping trees, she was driven homewards.

Jack was, for the first few minutes, so much engrossed with the reins as to be speechless; his companion sat, stiff and straight, at his elbow.

'I want to drive, Jack,' in a tone of remonstrance.

'You will have enough to do in keeping dry,' he said. 'When she gives over pulling like this, I'll get out your Scotch cloak ; it's under the seat.'

'Jack, don't be obstinate. I want to drive,' emphasizing the word 'want.'

'I see you do.'

'Will you give me the reins?'

'I told your mother I'd see you did not get unnecessarily wet. Hold down the umbrella in front of you, the rain beats in your face.'

'Give me the reins,' still more emphatically. 'Please, Jack.'

'No, certainly not. At least, not yet.'

A pause, during which a gust of rain-charged wind came howling up the lane into which they had turned. Awkwardly, in the teeth of it, Miss Fenwick fumbled with her umbrella, hoisting it forward as she had been directed to do. The result of her manœuvre was unfortunate ; the wind blew stronger than it seemed, for it wrenched the handle from her hand, and drove the umbrella down into the road.

It was the work of several seconds to pull up ; the rain pattered in Bab's face. She murmured something about 'how wet it was, and how stupid she had been.' Jack was magnanimous ; he was in that state of mind in which he hardly knew his own will from hers, though he had usurped those dripping reins which she coveted, and which he now handed to her.

'Never mind,' he said, 'I will pick it up ; there is more wind, I suppose, than I thought. Whoa hooa, Brunette.'

He got down, and pursued the umbrella as it trundled through the puddles, driven by the wind, and caught the flapping thing, badly damaged, some hundred yards back ; then he turned to retrace his steps.

Dusk though it was it was not dark, he was not blind, and yet—and yet where was the cart?

He reached the sharp corner of the lane whence he could see the long hill ahead: no entangled ruin lay in the ditch, no tragic sight to rend his heart, but horse and cart and driver, steady as a rock, climbing the incline at a good, round trot.

Then he knew what had happened: he understood the trick, and who had taken it.

A dilapidated umbrella has great capacity for comedy. Mr. Holland stood in the pouring rain and looked at it, then he laughed. Later on he took out his watch, consulted it, then faced about and hurried back to the high-road.

From her youth up Bab had played many a practical joke upon him, jokes such as had their origin in mere animal spirits; but things had changed with him of late; he laughed, but he did not relish the humour.

A dog has a most faithful heart, but he resents a laugh at his expense; even to his beloved master he owes a grudge should that potentate ridicule him. Jack turned back to the highway and hailed the mail-cart on its way to Combe, smiling still, but sardonically.

All the way up the long hill Miss Fenwick chuckled softly to herself. Not drive home?—of course she would drive home. How amused Jack must be as he trudged through the villainous mud carrying her umbrella. Cabinet ministers, actors, royalties, all the people whose biographies she had read in the school-room, had been amused by practical joking. She had been impressed by this fact at the time, and remembered it. Jack, who was no big-wig, would not presume to turn up his nose at a joke.

Would his sense of humour be washed and blown out of him? Bab stopped laughing, the rain trickled down her neck and dropped like a waterfall off her cape. It

was a long way home and a bad road ; in the Devon nature of country, as soon as the cart had ascended a hill, it descended precipitously ; the weather was vile. Jack had had thirty-six hours of day already, he had been very kind and useful in the kitchen overnight. Bah ! how wet it was !

What an audacious, malicious joke hers had been ! she began to doubt the fun of it. What would Jack do ? Good heavens, he would be late for dinner, and there were people coming to dine ; authorities at Combe might be but little amused by the delay. She was so used to getting her own way that she soon lost satisfaction in her victory. She thought she had behaved like a child, and like a disagreeable, stupid child.

With a lighter hand on the reins and a lighter weight in the cart, Brunette flew along, carrying Bab's joke too far, turning it into a flabby flat effort after mirth. The road wound round a hill, the wooded ground below sloped steeply down to a wide trout-stream, a wall of loosely-piled stones formed the hedge on either side the lane.

Pools of water gleamed faintly here and there beneath the mare's quick hoofs ; she was going home at her own pace, her spirits rising every moment, she took advantage of her driver's absent mind, she frisked in her harness, she shied at a puddle, she gathered herself together for a double shuffle on the flints. In mere exuberance of youth this high-spirited sinner, Brunette, defied her betters, and then took violent umbrage at the just correction of her mutiny.

People usually think twice before they touch a spirited horse with a whip, or before they attack a spirited person : a high spirit is a safeguard for man and beast. Meekness may be lashed in safety ; but they let sleeping dogs lie who value their skin.

If Bab had not been a little tired and a little worried—

if, in fact, she had been in her usual serene and practical frame of mind, she would not have come to grief that evening ; for then she would not have drawn the lash across Brunette's glossy coat, and, consequently, Brunette would not have gone mad with anger.

Brunette must give over dancing in harness, and Bab said so emphatically with the whip. The mare, resenting the lesson, started aside, backed, danced again, and then, dashing forward, brought the near shaft of the cart against the wall, shattering it to pieces against an out-jutting block of granite, thus bringing the homeward journey to an abrupt conclusion.

Let those laugh who win. Bab did not laugh ; all her energy was absorbed in pacifying Brunette. The alteration in the balance of the cart frightened the mare ; her mistress got out, soothed and unharnessed the nervous animal, listening all the while for footsteps which never came.

The shaft was broken off short, the cart was in the ditch, not a sound could be heard but the rain and wind in this lonely lane on the hill-side.

What had become of Jack ? What a fool she had been ! She could not wait for ever. There was nothing to be done but to get home on foot and leave the cart to its fate. Most women, under the circumstances, would have turned Brunette loose ; a restive horse, which starts and frets at every turn, was a serious charge, but Bab led her through three muddy miles of rough lane, plodding along pluckily and patiently enough, despising her arm for the pain in it.

Long before Miss Fenwick saw the lights of Combe, she had forgotten all about her practical joke ; the practical consequence was more impressive. She wanted pity and consolation, not laughter. She wanted dry stockings and her dinner more than she had ever wanted anything in her life.

CHAPTER XII.

Pull off your old coat, and roll up your sleeves,
Life is a hard road to travel, I believe.

A Song of the West.

‘A little stone may upset a large cart.’

WITH winds and frost and ‘they there stinking violets’ to spoil scent; rain and sunshine to ruin trout-streams; showers to drown, vermin to devour, neighbours to drive, poachers to net, instinct to warn the prey of gun and fowler, no wonder the sportsman carries a heavy heart and a dissatisfied tongue; for whose is so hard a fate as his? Against him, year in year out, the elements war.

The master of Combe—wet, splashed, muddy, fresh from the day’s slaughter—invaded his wife’s room.

The day had been merely fair, the birds scarce and wild; Captain Fenwick had only just come back from Croxton. Mary was resting; she sat with an open book on her knee before the fire, and drew away to make room for her lord beside her, smiling a little smile, the meaning of which he knew quite well.

‘He would not have laughed at her if she had been tramping through turnips and mire on a goose-chase all day; but there, he had done grumbling. She was a most comfortable, peaceful woman to come home to.’

He had a rare way of saying charming things to his wife; they came as easily to his lips as jibes, and jeers, and bitterness come to the frank marital lips of some men.

‘You look done up, Mary. What have you been doing?’

She told him of the luncheon at Burton, of the hockey; she said it had been a long day, and bit her lip to stop a sigh.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing—really nothing—nothing new.’

‘Won’t you tell me? I thought that five-and-twenty years ago you had done with feasting on your worries alone; you gave me your word I should halve them, Mary.’

‘Lady Young is on my nerves, Goff, that is it. She button-holed me this afternoon, and she is an uncomfortable companion, she thinks nothing that is nice.’

‘What did she say? Tell me, I won’t let it out.’ He gave this assurance smiling consciously, for he had a man-like knack of ‘letting out’ feminine mysteries.

‘She was unpleasant about Bab, she was odious about Jack, and she implied—I mean she actually said that Alethea Young was—was over-interested in her son.’

Men of Godfray’s calibre dislike gossip, and they have no idea how to take it. They do not understand how much may be said, and how little believed, or intended to be believed. They do not see how the teller of the tale draws here a little and there a little from her imagination, they do not see where the patches are placed; they have no sympathy for the light feminine method of infringing the ninth commandment; they take gossip *au grand sérieux*, and spoil the fun of it altogether.

Captain Fenwick frowned, it was odious to find that his possessions formed food for fault-finding.

‘Unpleasant about Bab? Why did you stand such a thing?’

“‘Whom Jezebel his wife stirreth up,’” said Mary, shaking her head. ‘Quite unintentionally, Godfray. Could I stop Lady Young’s tongue? Am I omnipotent? Besides, I have sympathy for her to a certain point; if I was Jack’s mother I should say disparaging things of Bab to you.’

‘But you would not invent ridiculous fictions about Alethea. I like Jack, as you know, but I think he must

put his foot down and have one thing or the other. This sort of shilly-shallying sickens me, I never liked it, it was your doing, Mary, and it's a failure. Why is Bab playing the fool and setting that woman's tongue at her? I shall put a stop to it. I'm not keen to be connected with Woodbury, those two, mother and daughter—pickles and butter-milk—will be bickering over here, worrying you and irritating me.'

Rarely did the lazy master of the house excite himself to be angry, but he was angry now. Mary listened with her eyes upon the fire.

'I'd rather Bab had no mind than a strong one, Mary, and so I tell her. Why isn't she like other women? I shall have it out with Jack to-night. I believe in speaking out. Let out a bit, don't hang on wondering what it all means, and misunderstanding like the idiots in books. Jack's face is as long as a wet week in November, and Bab is always flying about with some man, but never the legitimate one. It is time she settled down and thought seriously; Jack's such a fool about her, he won't give her a good blowing-up, that is what she wants; you,' attacking Mrs. Fenwick, but very gently, 'you have spoilt her, Mary.'

Mrs. Fenwick did not answer for a moment; then she said, slowly,

'I think, just for a little longer, I would leave it alone.'

'Long ago, Mary, you derided a let-alone policy; you spoke your mind out strong. I am inclined to do as you do, not to do as you tell me.'

'I think, just for a little longer, I would leave it alone,' she repeated. 'Night and day I turn the question over in my mind. She doesn't think Jack is a god, so if she should marry him she won't break her heart and spoil her temper when she finds he is only a man. She has no dreams from which to awake; she is as practical as—as a widow.'

'You always side with your sex, Mary; you think of her, not of him.'

'He,' Mrs. Fenwick lifted her misty eyes to her husband's face, 'he, Godfray, he is, and he has been, and he will be fonder of her than of anything in life.'

'Pshaw, Mary, grass may grow taller round a stone, but a man gets chilled if he comes too much in contact with a girl who is unimpressible as a golf ball. Jack must be something stronger than patient, and so I shall tell him.'

The dressing-bell had rung, some of the dressing-hour had worn away. Mary had more to say, arguments ready to modify her husband's purpose, but no time in which to use them, for Becket broke into the conversation.

Dramatic Becket from whose lips common-place fiction was arresting, and whose latest intelligence this evening set both her hearers on their feet.

'Miss Fenwick had not come in, and the cart had not come home, and the night was dark as pitch, and the rain fell in buckets, and there was company expected at dinner, and Rawle had begun to think something must have happened, and sure as fate there wouldn't be time to get Miss Bab dressed, unless she was hustled up to her room without delay. And who would fetch Miss Bab? And where in the world could she be?'

Captain and Mrs. Fenwick looked at each other.

'She is all right, Godfray, Jack drove her home; there is some mistake, nothing more. They are sheltering somewhere.'

These reassurances were ineffective, for Captain and Mrs. Fenwick hurried out into the passage, making for the staircase. Towards them, walking along leisurely up the stairs, with a paper under his arm and a candle in his hand came Jack himself, his eyes upon the ground, his thoughts a league away.

'Oh, here you are, Jack; that's all right. Becket

came to us with some cock-and-bull story about your being lost. Where is Bab ?'

'I've no notion.'

'What do you mean ? You drove her home.'

'I drove her to the foot of East Hill, no further.'

'East Hill ! Why to East Hill ? I don't understand. Is there anything wrong ?'

'Not with me. But I can't think why she hasn't arrived ; she ought to have been here an hour ago.' Then Jack, shortly, and with no relish at all, explained the situation.

'It was a joke, brief as true wit. I made the best of it, for I remembered the mail and I got to the corner in time to catch it. Defying Government, I got a lift to Combe. I was here soon after half-past six.'

It was not a tale that shed lustre on its hero, and Captain Fenwick, in his present frame of mind, had no sympathy for him.

'Bab is out of her teens,' he said, very angry, 'you ought to see that she left off playing the fool like this. You should put your foot down and stop it. I've just been telling Mary that this sort of nonsense can't go on ; it is bad for both of you. I won't have it ; it must be one thing or the other ; you must have it out with Bab. I'm sick of it.'

There was a very awkward pause after this speech ; then Mrs. Fenwick, with beseeching eyes upon her husband's kindled face, said nervously,

'What can have become of her, Godfray ?'

'Turned back to follow him, of course,' blustered the squire ; 'don't you know what a woman always does to a back ? she follows it.'

This solution of the matter may have satisfied Jack, for he walked on into his own room and shut the door, not sharing for once in his life in Fenwick anxiety.

'Get back to your room and dress, Mary, you can do

no good. I'll go down-stairs and see what is to be done. If,' more gently, 'she had come to any grief, we should have heard of it by this time.'

This was the last practical joke Bab would ever play, it had fallen flat as Salisbury Plain; the lights of Combe House were balm to her eyes, she was plodding up the drive now, her wet boots clung like paper to her tired feet, the persevering rain had worsted her waterproof armour, and had soaked her to the skin. The falling leaves, heavy with rain, fell upon her, she trod them soft and sodden underfoot.

Brunette kept up her spirits, ambling and dancing still, though now Basten led her by knotted reins.

Bab was concerned with her own misfortunes, she had forgotten that any part of the incident had been intended for a joke; she had wondered once or twice what had become of Jack; of course he would turn up all right. How she had longed to rest her aching arm, and turn over Brunette to his keeping. He would be sorry when he heard how actively she had wanted him.

Her father heard the muffled tramping on the drive, and went to meet her. He could not listen to her tale of woe and scold her. Though she had behaved badly, though the new T-cart lay in the ditch three miles off, yet here the poor child was safe and sound, soaked to the skin, tired, laughing; how thankful he was, after his momentary anxiety, to get her home with a whole skin. There was no time to scold her. Even now the sound of approaching wheels foretold the arrival of guests, father and daughter had alike to hurry off to dress.

In a pitiful plight, dripping but good-humoured, she met with more open arms and more commiseration in her own precincts. She had never learnt the ordinary way in which women 'who get themselves into a mess' are treated, sympathy for and extrication from 'the mess' were the only consequences of Miss Fenwick's

folly ; retribution was nothing accounted of in those days.

Becket and Rawle flew about, showering pity and praise as they got her into warm, dry clothes, unplaited her wads of wet hair and dried it.

For one brief minute Mrs. Fenwick came into the room on her way down-stairs, and from some subtle reason Bab just then remembered Jack, and asked whether he had got home yet, and how he had come?

‘Jack had driven back, he was down in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Fenwick must follow him at once, some people had arrived. It would have been far wiser,’ this severely, ‘if Bab had gone straight to bed after such a soaking ; she had better not trust too much to her own strength. It was a deplorable accident, and Mrs. Fenwick deplored the whole affair.’

‘I am very sorry, mother.’

But Mrs. Fenwick’s rustling skirts were trailing down the passage ; she had been stiff, she was not to be propitiated by that airy apology. It was Jack who had had the blowing-up, it was Jack who had borne the brunt of Captain Fenwick’s displeasure ; by every plea of justice Bab was the person who deserved a heartache. Mrs. Fenwick was haunted by Jack’s face. Godfray’s sudden attack had been unwise, uncomfortable, and ill-timed.

An unsuccessful quest is game for rating—alas ! poor Jack.

Half-way through dinner, Bab appeared. She came in upon a roar of conversation, and found that all her explanations and apologies had been made for her. She took her allotted seat, which chanced to be far from Jack, who was talking to Mrs. Kaufmann, and whose eye she could not catch though she tried to do so. Then she set to work at the courses, too behindhand with them to have much leisure yet awhile for conversation.

Though she ate well, she looked pale. Her satin dress was dead white, and suited her admirably. She had had no time to don extra adornments. Her neck, her arms, her hands were bare of ornaments; her hair was still damp, looking dark and heavy round her face. She had not ploughed through that sea of despond unscathed; she really was a little tired, and did not quite know what to make of so novel a sensation.

She had meant to attract Jack's attention, but she was wedged between a brace of chatterboxes, and she soon forgot her intention. Later on in the evening she got into the heart of an arm-chair, and had no energy to move; this perverse lover of hers never came near her, so she postponed those little apologies and explanations, which her mother evidently thought Jack's due, until a more convenient season.

They were going, Jack and she, her father and one of the Campbell boys, to the Beacon next morning, they were going for a day at the rabbits on the moor, there would be ample time then to say the necessary civilities. It was strange that Jack should not have been compassionate; the walk had been atrocious and, in sober truth, she might, had she behaved less sagely, have been hurt, really hurt, upset and hurt.

Bab was talking hunting with a neighbour, and enjoyed herself lazily in her corner; but most of the people were gathered round the piano, where Jack sat and sang very tuneful and lusty airs, shunning 'Devout Lovers,' 'To Aletheas,' and all sentiment, but shining in 'Chevalier' and 'Comic Opera.'

This was music such as Bab appreciated; she broke off her talk and listened. In a pause after a song, her Majesty called out—

'Sing "Old Dutch," Jack. Aunt Cis likes that.'

But 'Old Dutch' was not sung: he was not a barrel organ to be turned by its owner's hand. He thundered

out the '*Zwei Grenadieren*' to its clash of cymbals; when that was done, his *répertoire* was at an end, he said, and he set a soprano voice to work, turning pages and murmuring thanks, and being eminently miserable and musical.

It was not to soprano voices that Mrs. Kaufmann cared to listen; she came over to her niece's side as soon as the '*Zwei Grenadieren*' was finished, humming the last verse.

'Why, Bab, he sings divinely. I should have been a domestic woman if your Uncle Oliver had sung instead of sleeping, when we were *tête-à-tête*. Do you know, a bass voice sets my heart aching as though I was eighteen. There comes a time when a sentimental pang is a downright luxury. I have a lump in my throat because that old reprobate came to grief; it is an exceedingly hard lump—it tastes of youth.'

'What do you mean? Tastes of youth! I don't know the flavour.'

'No, you are right, Bab, you've no palate for such delicacies; in fact, I think very little of your taste at all. Here you two sit talking, talking, talking quadruped, talking shop. It's manners to hold your tongue at a concert. Yes, I'm talking myself now, but that girl is singing nonsense, and she is singing flat.'

'Is she?'

'No ear, no taste, no sense but common-sense. Are you not ashamed of yourself? Get up, come over to the piano, and as soon as this ditty is done I'll sing to you myself.'

So it came to pass that presently, when Mrs. Kaufmann sat herself down on the music-stool, Bab stood beside her, heavy-eyed and languid, but within a foot of Jack. It was wise to bring the mountain to Mahomet, and to chain that prophet—who understood the man-œuvre perfectly—to the piano, by requesting him to hold

a candle forward so as to shed its light on the pages, which the mountain herself manipulated. Mrs. Kaufmann was pleased with herself, and sang her song with a queer forlorn sort of pathos, at which every one laughed save Mahomet, who forgot all his duties excepting the arduous one of the candle.

'My days pass pleasantly away,
My nights are blest with peaceful sleep;
I feel no symptoms of decay,
I have no cause to mourn nor weep;
My foes are very few and shy,
My friends are neither false nor cold,
And yet, of late, I often sigh—
"I'm growing old!"

My growing talk of olden times,
My growing thirst for early news,
My growing apathy to rhymes,
My growing love of easy shoes,
My growing hate of noise and boys,
My growing fear of taking cold—
All whisper in the plainest voice,
"You're growing old."

I'm growing fonder of my staff,
I'm growing dimmer in the eyes,
I'm growing fainter in my laugh,
I'm growing calmer in my sighs,
I'm growing careless of my dress,
I'm growing frugal of my gold,
I'm growing wise, I'm growing—yes,
I'm growing old.

I see it in my changing taste,
I see it in my fading hair,
I see it in my growing waist,
I see it round me everywhere,
A thousand signs proclaim the truth,
So plain a truth is seldom told,
Yes, even in my vaunted youth,
I'm growing old.'

When the song was done, every one laughed. Mrs. Kaufmann was pleased to joke at her own expense, and her audience appreciated that sort of humour, all save Mr. Lascelles who frowned upon the audacious.

Bab stood at Jack's elbow and chuckled softly, then

she spoke to him, falling into the trap laid for her. Jack saw the snare and who had laid it, and he was not grateful to Mrs. Kaufmann.

‘I have been telling Mary that this sort of thing can’t go on : it must be one thing or the other.’

He had sung and heard many a ditty during the evening, but those words of Captain Fenwick’s had got into all the music and vibrated in his ear.

‘You must have it out with Bab, this sort of nonsense can’t go on any longer.’

Nonsense? Perhaps, after all, nonsense was the right word.

‘Jack,’ said she, ‘you got the best of it this afternoon. Much the best of it.’

‘Certainly—I got home first.’

‘It was a stupid, childish sort of trick.’

‘It was.’

‘I,’ with a weary gesture, ‘I’m tired. I wish these people would go.’

‘There is a sofa behind you.’

She sat down, inviting him with a gracious movement to the seat at her side, but Mrs. Kaufmann sat at the piano, playing, and he stood and watched her.

‘How well she plays, but I hate the “Marseillaise,” there is a fiend in it, a fiend such as accounts for a revolution, such as might evolve communism. Our national air is the right sort of tune for a just battle. Strong, cool, steady.’

Bab was yawning, but she made another effort to propitiate Jack.

“‘Confound their knavish tricks;” you are thinking of my sentence, Jack, I really was confounded. Sit down here and talk to me, please do ; mother is frowning at me, she thinks I ought to be entertaining somebody, and I’m too tired to talk.’

So he sat down by her side and talked to her as he

had been bidden to do ; and when the guests had gone, and the last carriage had rumbled away out of hearing, he lit her candle for her and bade her a brief good-night.

‘Jack, we are going to the Beacon to-morrow, don’t oversleep yourself after your long day. You,’ with unwonted observation, ‘look tired.’

He was very white, lips and cheeks alike.

‘I am pretty near tired out,’ he answered slowly. ‘Good-night.’

CHAPTER XIII.

We thought there was no more behind,
But such a day to-morrow as to-day.—*Winter's Tale.*

‘A wound is not cured by the bending of the bow.’

YESTERDAY

‘Autumn amongst her drooping marigolds
Wept all her garnered fields, her empty folds,’

but to-day, borrowing a wrinkle from her capricious sister April’s behaviour, October dried her eyes and smiled. A smile that warmed the country-side with a touch of the dead summer.

The people who had come for the ball were leaving Combe that day. Soon after breakfast their host and his daughter bade their guests premature farewells, for these indefatigable sporting-folk were off to the Beacon after the rabbits, and none of the precious day might be wasted in doing the civil.

Jack, with a small Campbell boy from the rectory bubbling with excitement by his side, stood in the sunshine on the terrace looking, with something of the pain of farewell in his eyes, across the matchless glory of the landscape spread before him.

Those vast vales and tinted hills, the wide ponds

where the water gleamed like a sapphire in the sun, where the sepia water-fowl floated, and the rushes bent and whispered in the wind ; where afar off the pink arable fields and the rich pastures sunk and heaved as they clambered over the gentle blue hills ; how well he knew, and how well he liked the loveliness of the land which custom could not stale, nor anything (save a sea-fog) rob of its infinite variety.

Steep and manifold were the ups and downs of the country-side, yet they shaped a most harmonious prospect. Would to heaven that the ups and downs of life might, some day, be blent into so rich and perfect a whole.

Lance Campbell never ceased to talk though Jack was as dull as ink, though air-gun and catapult did not seem to interest him, though in the middle of the boy's conversation he broke in.

'Come along. Here they are ! You must finish that yarn to the rabbits.'

Far away on the common where the Beacon Point sloped towards the sea, the rabbits, to which Jack alluded, were sitting. I do not think that they thought more than they could help of the human bipeds who were wont to kill time, and them alike, on a fine day together.

There they sat in the sunshine, driven with ferrets, for some unfathomed reason, from their burries overnight, and disinclined upon this glorious morning to return to domesticity underground.

No worries connected with the coming winter, no anxieties concerning their large families, no foreknowledge of powder and shot, of gun, of dog, of beater, spoilt their joy.

Now and then there was a scurry from a gorse-bush to a tuft of couch grass, or a rush from a bush of whortleberry to a dry little hillock ; now and then the heather rustled and a small tail flickered by the bracken. But,

mostly, the little people sat still in the beds they had made, discussing maybe the shocks and hairbreadth escapes of the preceding evening ; the inconveniences of wire-netting and the horrors of wire-springs.

Perforce, many unpleasant offices must be filled. Hangman and judge, butcher and sportsman are, more or less, necessary adjuncts to this curious world. Their odious functions are duties that must be done, but let those fortunate people who may eke out existence without being instruments to carry out the mysterious law, which bids humanity inflict great suffering upon their sentient fellows, rejoice ; let those fortunate people be mightily thankful, let them in degree, according to their dispositions, chant *Te Deums*.

Anon, a more substantial sound than the busy whispering of the breeze reached these happy small fry on the common. Long, soft ears were pricked to listen ; in the twinkling of a dewdrop up went a regiment of bunnies upon their hind legs.

Alas, yes, those heavy thuds were human footsteps muffled by heather ; then came a horrid sound to hear—a mortal laugh : a laugh which cleared the open of humble life, for every rabbit scuttled off to covert and lay low, under gorse and brambles, awaiting a consummation for which they had no devout wish, no world-weary resignation.

That laugh was the only one, for the small advancing army were seriously bent on slaughter, they had come a long way for the purpose ; through the sunshine and the richly-tinted woods they had driven thither. At the farm, just beneath the brow of the hill, they had alighted, and were marching, marshalled in business array, to this gorgeous tract of high-lying country, where the small quadrupeds throve and multiplied so pleasingly.

On the left hand Jack took his station, to the boy and

girl were given the centre places, and at their right Captain Fenwick stood; the keeper, with a retriever at his heels, behind him.

'These yer common be theeke wi' robbits, zur,' said a beater, addressing his master. 'I've zeed scores an' scores ov 'em veeding t'other zide o' thickee goil. Yü kin shüet 'em whir yü be, ev yü 've a mind tü: or yü kin 'at 'em over wi' a stick.'

'Get to work.'

So the beaters and the spaniels got to work, and those quaking, crouching little people provided the fun.

No king could have so regal a death-chamber as they: high furze-bushes, thick and formidable, spangled with honey-sweet golden blossom, and hung with silver cobwebs by the moorland engineers, made choice tombstones; the heather and the heath were over, and their twisted scrub was sad as a cypress-tree. Near at hand was the ghost of a concave Roman encampment encircled by wind-tortured firs, their broken branches standing out from their rough trunks like the prongs of a rake; beneath them the barren ground was strewed with the destructive spikes of the balmy trees, it was bare save for the tangled blackberry-bushes, and cut off from the common by a broad trench, brimful of rotting leaves.

Lady-ferns and osmundi grew tall in the deep glen near by, but their charms, like those of the bracken, were on the wane; a gaudy bronze and streaks of red upon their fronds wrote of their coming fate. Through the moss at their feet trickled a lively stream, singing the water-song such as no mortal musician ever yet sung in the memory of man; the water-song which with the self-same melody can rejoice with those who do rejoice, or weep with those that weep. The sympathetic singer that tunes his voice so skilfully as to fall in with the mood of the hearer, and chants one song to satisfy countless diversities of hearers.

Stretching beneath the Beacon Point lay league upon league, league upon league of verdant land; far off against the horizon rose the round sweeps of Dartmoor; the nearer hills were fringed with firs fine as feathers against the blue, sparrow-egg hue of the cloudless sky. A peep of the Channel lay, like a haze, afar off, edged with red sandstone cliffs. Through the vast valley a train crept, murmuring like the sea, and trailing a long flag of smoke in its track. The common was a home such as one might oneself be loth to leave at a moment's notice.

A clump of thin *passée* beeches, and a plantation of browning larches flanked this mortuary; skirting this, the four guns, dealing out death right and left, steadily advanced.

There were plenty of rabbits, therefore there was plenty to be done. If, by chance, one of the prey continued to escape after his death-warrant had been cracked, it was but seldom. And some civil person was sure to say, 'Awkward shot that,' or 'Bad luck, Bab,' to explain the circumstance.

Lance was as candid a boy as he was keen a sportsman, and once when he was puzzled, he broke out bluntly—

'I say, but why does she always have first shot? You always let her have first shot.'

Though he jerked the shoulder nearest Jack to indicate that he was addressing that person, he got no response but a bang. Later, he answered his own question.

'It's because she is a girl, I suppose. And, I say,' this in lowered, though audible tones, 'she takes everybody's whenever she can, don't she?'

Like a small army, sure of victory, and with no nasty chance of a return of hostilities, the quartette briskly advanced. Keen, excited, with the enthusiasm of her age and sex, Bab had outstripped her comrades, she was some few paces ahead of them.

The beater who was working between Lance and Jack was standing over against a high clump of 'fuzz,' and now drew back, with so sudden a movement as to arrest the attention of the whole party.

Every tutored ear caught a sharp flutter of wings; from those bushes, close to the Campbell boy, rose a slim, brown bird, and flew forward.

'Mark, cock,' cried Pike, the keeper; it was the first woodcock of the season, his voice rang and thrilled his hearers.

Forward flew this important bird, every gun rose to every eager shoulder, an impatient queenly hand was first in the field, Miss Fenwick fired. The fool of a woodcock, untouched, turned sharply, twisting on his way, and dipping low to the left, made for the covert behind his foe.

A member of the lower sex, though she have the hardihood to keep her heart, has yet a disastrous knack of losing her head. Bab forgot every one on the common save the woodcock, she covered him as he flew, following him with her gun, seeing nothing but his precious carcass at the end of her barrel, and letting fly with her second barrel as soon as she judged it to be the right moment for the murder. On flew the lucky fowl, this time with route unmarked.

'Who fired that?' yelled a fierce voice; the smoke hanging about the barrel answered for the wretched sportswoman.

'Jack's hit.'

'Good God, what have you done?'

'Oh! Oh! Oh!'

'Lor' 'ave mussy, 'ere's a concern.'

'Urn tü un, Bill.'

'Awe law, thir's blüd on 'un.'

At this dramatic moment the common reeled before Bab's stricken eyes;—there Jack lay, like—like a shot

rabbit, prone on the heather. In a moment he was surrounded; they had all rushed to him, and he could hardly convince them by word of mouth that he was not dead, nor even likely to die.

He did not quite know himself what had happened to him, or what extent of damage the excruciating pain about his knee exactly signified. But he knew so far as to be certain that he was not death-struck, for he had received the main part of the charge in his left leg. He got up at once, finding as he did so that the knee-cap has as great a capacity for suffering as the human heart.

Leaning upon Lance's ready shoulder, Jack looked down at the shattered *débris* of knickerbocker above his strong, saving leather gaiter. Captain Fenwick was on his knees trying to see through the tattered frieze, so as to gauge the extent of the misfortune.

Dumb, white as her own linen collar, Bab stood trembling where she was; she could not move, light as was her twenty-bore gun, yet it was too heavy for her, mutely she handed it to Pike.

'It is not much,' said her victim, reassuringly, 'the knee is peppered a bit, Bab, that is all.'

'It was a nasty smack,' said the school-boy, looking queer and shivering, but regaining his voice and his spirits at a bound. 'Forty paces off. She couldn't hit the rabbits like that, could she?'

'If you had kept the line, Bab,' said her father, gravely, severely, 'this wouldn't have happened.'

For once in her life Miss Fenwick had no word to say, no suggestion to make, her lips quivered; and Jack, seeing how it was with her, was filled with gratitude to Pike, who took the sinner's side.

'Twaz th' vurst cock, zur, an' thir, 'er's awnly a maid, atter awl. 'Twüd 'ave bin wance tü offen ev yü'd 'it 'un 'igher up, miss, for tho' 'tez an orkard concern to git ridds ov a lig, 'twüd 'av bin a wurz job ev yü'd

a-blawed out th' breath ov 'un, or scrüped out th' eye ov 'un.'

'Get rid of the leg?' Lance's voice was hollow, his eyes round with wonder.

'Poof, rot,' said the sufferer, but with a pang at heart.

'Ef yer plaze, zur,' said the keeper, addressing his master, 'I wudden touch et, let 'un bide as 'tez. Reckoning vur th' scatterin' ov th' charge, ther's a powerful lot ov shot in et, I kin zee. 'Tez doctur's business thease yer, an' th' süner 'er gits tüet th' better, I sim.'

'Go down to the farm, Jan, and get up the cart at once. Look sharp.'

'Yü kin hobble a bit, Mr. Jack, can't 'ee? Us kin git thickee cart up close t'other zide ov th' fuzz. I'd git thir zo süne as paws'ble, avore yer lig knaws what's come tü 'un, zur, an' gets as stiff as a fince, an' zet vur th' inflammation.'

Over the heather and couch grass, round hillocks, through scrub, over stones, Jack painfully and laboriously limped, holding to Godfray's arm on one side and to Lance's shoulder upon the other, setting his teeth to keep his own counsel when the pain shivered and quivered, playing like red-hot fireworks about the joint.

The cause of this metamorphosis followed the procession, her mind gradually recovering its balance as she did so; she was so thankful it was no worse. For a moment she had been terror-struck, for a moment she had felt a fearful and unknown sensation of horror; but now Jack was getting along famously. It did not seem to be a painful wound; he was the most cheery of the whole group. She wished her knees would not rock under her; she wished she could lie down for a minute and close her eyes. She wondered how people felt when they fainted.

Below ground there was no doubt some ironical

whispering amongst bereaved, relieved small people. 'The big, blustering bipeds made a vast hullabaloo when it fell to their turn to provide sport. Here was a great thing, out of which twenty good rabbits might be made, holding up his own paw and leaning on his neighbours, crawling at snail's pace towards a cart which had been hurried up to help him, and which stood in waiting on the turf; while a spiritless popper in petticoats, as pale as a white rabbit, followed with hanging head behind the male bipeds. What a fuss they all made! Why did not he crawl under a furze-bush, and lie there quietly and die? Their comrades had met with such a fate in many a case, no commotion had been made about them.

Over the start, Bab came to the fore; every one treated Jack as a sufferer, and sufferers are treated as imbeciles without wills of their own, of whom any one, who has a mind, can take care or direct.

The seat in the cart had to be pushed back to allow space for Jack's wounded limb. The squire advised, Pike bungled, the horse fidgeted over the necessary moves.

'Go to Shylock's head, Lance. Shove it back, Pike, to the last hole, the very last—there, that's right.'

'How are you and the boy to get back?' asked the victim, he was leaning now on Queen Bab's proffered arm, leaning lightly on an unsteady support.

'We shall,'—vaguely—'I suppose we shall walk; don't bother about us, we'll get home somehow.'

'For once in your life, Jack, think of no one but yourself.'

The red-hot fireworks with sharp and sickening pangs played in his knee-cap, as Jack was hoisted to the seat. The amateur arrangements for his comfort were not quite scientifically applied.

'Roll that rug, Bab, push it in at the back. Further,

further ; you are doing more harm than good, I'm afraid. Is that better, Jack ?'

Mendaciously Jack replied that 'It was far better.'

'Is it quite comfortable ?'

'Don't ask silly questions, Bab : when you shoot a fellow in the knee don't ask him if it's quite comfortable.'

Captain Fenwick was too thoroughly distressed to be consolatory, feather-brained heads deserved to be snapped off ; he rebuked his daughter sharply.

Jolting slowly over the rough path the cart now drove off, the little company in the sunshine stood silent and watched it out of sight. Then at their young mistress's suggestion the men set off for home, carrying the spoil and followed by the depressed and puzzled dogs.

There was some suspicious moisture in Bab's eyes, which she shaded with her hand as she looked down the road whither the cart had gone ; the boy was harassed by the sight, and began to cheer his companion as well as he knew how.

'I wonder where that woodcock's gone, Miss Fenwick ? It was an awful pity you missed him ; but, don't you see, petticoats are a beastly handicap ; and I shouldn't mind if I was you.'

A smile flickered round the hearer's lips. Lance was encouraged to go on.

'It would have been a jolly sight worse if you'd shot a bit higher. Don't you know, now-a-days, they can make *splendid* legs just like real, with springs and feet as natural as anything ; there's a chap at school with a beauty.'

Then Miss Fenwick laughed outright.

'Oh, Lance,' she said, 'Pike draws such a long bow. The shot will have to be taken out, and Mr. Holland will have to lie up for a time, it won't be worse than that.'

'Then what is there to blub about ?' he reasoned.

'Mr. Holland was nice to you about it, and Captain Fenwick hardly jawed at all. It is rot to mind, it was all an accident. I—I say, do you think they took the lunch back in the cart? It's a long pull home, and I'm hungry, aren't you?'

'Yes,' slowly, half-heartedly.

'Then I'll just go down to the farm and see if there is any food about. Don't you come, you sit down and wait for me.'

She seated herself on the warm turf; around her the bright, companionable breeze was playing over the scented gorse. Her eyes were dry, she was—and it is a joyful thing to be—thankful she had done no permanent harm; at forty paces the shot must have scattered, and by the time she reached Combe it would have been extracted. She drove all apprehensions away, she would not allow herself to worry; she hated to feel anxiety.

There was a decidedly boyish touch about Bab: so natural, so inconsiderate, so set upon enjoyment was she.

When Lance returned with a 'daw lawf' (dough cake) and a mug of cider, he found her in good spirits, and with a satisfactory appetite.

He went up to Combe the following day, and cheered the patient by telling him all about that promiscuous meal on the common, about the walk home, the stoat which he had chased, and the sodden blackberries which he had eaten. The walk had been awfully jolly, only they had met the Woodbury carriage, and it seemed that Lady Young had had some difference of opinion with Bab in the beech avenue. Lady Young had been very 'shirty' indeed. She had seemed to think that Bab had missed that beastly woodcock on purpose.

'That's how it is,' the boy had said; 'if you do get yourself in for a row, people think you tried to do it. But Miss Fenwick didn't care a straw, bless you. She didn't even take the fag to cheek her back.'

CHAPTER XIV.

Bubbles round a keel
Mean nought, excepting that the vessel moves :
There's more than passion goes to make a man.
Aurora Leigh.

'It is better to fall from a window than the roof.'

SCIENTIFIC excursions after shot are interesting to the doctor, and impressive to the patient. Jack had to undergo much impressive unpleasantness with his unfortunate knee. Then he was put, dully, to bed with his leg in a splint, and told to be very quiet, and get to sleep.

Anxious, low-voiced, commiserating angels came in and looked upon him and reassured him about his wounds, pitying him and bringing him grapes, and then stealing off with the great sick-room fiat on their lips,

'Now you had better try to get to sleep.'

It would have been as easy just then for Jack to get to Timbuctoo as to get to sleep ; added to the hot, smarting, well-known discomfort of the mind was the sting of shot and ache of probe in his stiff, uncompromising knee-cap.

For one short moment the miscreant Bab herself appeared at his bedside : she was uneasy, out of place in a sick-room. She looked down at him with wondering, apprehensive eyes, much as he had seen her watch a long-clothed, crying baby.

'Oh, Jack, I'm so sorry. I was such a clumsy, careless idiot. I shall never forgive myself.'

This was charmingly put, but she did not live up to her penitence. At least she hurried away at the earliest opportunity, saying, as her aunt had said,

'Now you had better try to get to sleep.'

And he heard her laughing and talking in the passage presently, on her way down to dinner.

Next morning, betimes, she paid him a visit, full of stereotyped questions, easily to be reassured by the comfortable answers which he made her, and again on the outlook for a civil and early method of retreat.

‘Mr. Bedford thought he must keep quiet to-day. Should she send him up a book? *Three Men in a Boat*? He had read that, he had always read everything, what a pity! Then he had better have the morning paper. She would see if it had come, and send it up to him.’

After all, a taste for reading does, in a sick man, prove convenient. But the *Daily Telegraph* did not dispel the twilight about his bed when the light of his eyes had left him. He turned his face to the wall and lay silent. In the afternoon the invalid was brought down to the smoking-room and ensconced upon the sofa there; later his mother and Alethea Young came to see him.

Finding him alone, they stayed a mighty long while to cheer his solitude. They told him everything that had been said about the accident, and Lady Young spoke her mind, which was not a nice one, of Bab. Alethea contradicted, and argued softly, and kept the conversation flowing like the Exe.

Once footsteps paused at the threshold, and then stole swiftly away. Jack did not hear them, nor did he smell the bunch of violets which his intended visitor had gathered for him; he did not know that Bab had heard buzzing, bleating voices in the smoking-room and had beaten a retreat, driving off to golf at Burton without the farewell she had planned.

It was a pity, perhaps, that fate ordained the matter thus: not that the violets, or the farewell, could have staunched a certain ugly gaping hurt—such a wound as gave Jack a sleepless and wretched night: a night all the more painful because the splint would not allow it to be restless.

Dr. Bedford was dissatisfied with his patient's condition; pain is not wholesome; his mind and his knee-cap between them had sent Jack's temperature up unusually 'high.' The remedy the doctor ordered for such threatening symptoms was perfect peace, a day in bed and perfect peace; the doctor's idea of perfect peace were drawn blinds, a liquid diet, and—Mrs. Fenwick.

So Jack's gentle hostess sat beside him, reading softly soothing sick-room literature. Her voice was like unto her daughter's; to it, not to the words which it articulated, Jack lay and listened.

The low-pitched voice, the down-drawn blind, the enforced stillness of the prostrate man, all alike spoke of the perfect peace prescribed: the only drawback to the restful scene were the patient's eyes, which glowed and shone, and were not peaceful. They and the compressed lips beneath them distressed his nurse, and when later on in the dusky afternoon a blithe cry of 'Dan, Dan, Dan, come out for a run, you old dear, I want you,' came up to the quiet room, and a flush coloured Jack's face dark from brow to chin, Mrs. Fenwick broke off suddenly in her story, and at length spoke out of what had been in both their minds from first to last.

'I didn't hear them come back, Jack.'

'The carriage came in half-an-hour ago.'

'Dr. Bedford told them that you were to be kept quiet to-day.'

'A most convenient order.'

'If Dr. Bedford had allowed it, Bab would have come to see you.'

'Yes, she'd have come all right.'

'You are angry with her.'

'Yes—no, angry with myself. You seem to have forgotten what you said to me, Mrs. Fenwick, but I remember.'

'Don't talk about it now.'

'Do you think it's more wholesome to keep it to myself?'

'Things seem so ill when one is ill oneself.'

'They seem no worse to me than they had done for weeks. Captain Fenwick spoke out pretty plain, and he was right. It must be one thing or the other, he said. You, and he, and I can see that it can't be the one thing, and so it must be the other. I drive myself wild as I lie here looking ahead.'

'Don't think about it now, Jack.'

'I'd give my soul to forget it if I knew how.'

He lurched impatiently in his physical as well as in his mental bondage, and Mrs. Fenwick laid her hand gently, kindly, upon his.

'Jack,' she said, trying to brace her charge, 'far off and with your work, you would forget it in time. In time you might find some one who would suit you, and who would——'

This suggestion was more than he could stand just then. He could go, he would go, but he could not plan for the future; he could get through the present, perhaps, living from hour to hour. He broke into Mrs. Fenwick's rational prophecy fiercely.

Bab was like no other woman, and his love for her was, of course, abnormal, exceptional. Get over it, forget it, put a gentle, domestic woman into her place? Never! that was the one thing absolutely impossible. He could go away and leave her, but as long as his body walked the earth his soul would remain at Combe. He raved to his patient nurse.

Would he break away from this bitter existence now while his pulses throbbed? In cold blood it is hard to turn aside from the path, however steep it may be, which leads to possible happiness.

Meanwhile, as though a brain-wave had come down

to her from the sick-room, Mrs. Kaufmann followed her niece out upon the terrace.

‘Bab,’ she said, ‘come back and have your tea. I want to talk to you.’

‘I am going to put my chickens to bed. Come with me.’

‘Chickens are uninteresting, noisy, insipid, greedy people, but if you will promise to hurry up I’ll come.’

They turned together off the terrace, crossing the mossy turf under the cedars they passed through the flower-garden, and walking by way of the wicket-gate into steep, grazing land, reached the poultry-house.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs. Kaufmann, holding up her dainty skirts very high and peering about with a disdainful nose, ‘I believe you like a Plymouth rock better than that nice man.’

‘Which nice man?’

‘There are not many nice men about, Bab. Can’t you guess which?’

Bab was shuing a stray hen from a bush to her legitimate perch, and made no reply.

‘I’m talking of Jack; if you shoot your young man in the leg, don’t you think that you owe him a sufficient compensation? Surely he expects you to show some lively interest in him. You ought to make a dreadful fuss, you ought to be at his keyhole night and day. He wants bushels of compassion, he wants to be kissed and made well.’

‘Jack was feverish to-day, he was to be kept quiet.’

Bab was locking the padlock of the poultry-house, whence she had emerged with three new-laid eggs in her hands which, in a business-like way, she marked with a pencil; her aunt, with lifted eyebrows, watching her.

‘Bab, have you no sweet tooth? Don’t you like jam with your bread? Where are all your instincts? What’s the matter with you? There is a chance for you of

happiness, solid happiness, such as I or any healthy-minded woman would have given my eyes for, and you go and feed these horrid cocks and hens, and let it slip away. Yes, I know all about it; I'm an empty-headed woman, but I know the real thing when I see it. Jack's not the sort of man who shovels in a wife as a last thought to his turn-out, who adds her as a sort of rough-weather apron on the back seat, to be tucked round his knees when she is wanted, to jolt and jar along, cramped in a cart that doesn't suit her, till she is often on the brink of jumping out. I've driven along myself like that for years and years.'

They were moving down the hill towards home, the collie came rushing up to Bab, fawning upon her; she took no notice of the dog, her eyes were on the grass at her feet.

'Dan,' said Mrs. Kaufmann, with a soft, half bitter laugh, 'good old dog.—You know that fat old Major Ogilvie, your father's friend, after whom that dog was called. Would you believe that he gave me a very vile heartache, Bab, a very long time ago? No wonder you are laughing, those things are amusing in retrospect, it is much better to laugh than to cry, and I don't suppose I would know him now if I met him in the street. Yet it was bad at the time; I hardened my heart, or he hardened it for me. Don't harden Jack's, you have no notion how bad life is with a hard heart.'

'My dear Aunt Cis, don't, don't; I haven't done anything—it's all right, it is indeed.'

'For you, yes, all right for you, and if your turn should come (we all get it—it's like the measles, as that funny man says, best to get it over when you are young, you don't take it so badly, it is a lighter form in your youth) and things go wrong, don't try to mend matters by marrying the wrong man, it makes a mountain out of a molehill; marriage is—so difficult.'

Bab stared, she flicked at her skirts with the whip in her free hand, and opened her eyes very wide.

‘Don’t you,’ with appalling frankness, ‘get on with Uncle Oliver?’

‘I am talking of abstract, not personal matrimony. Suppose a girl loves a king who has knelt at her feet as a courtier, suppose she marries the king and finds he is no king at all, but a clown who gives up kneeling as soon as the honeymoon’s over, and expects homage from her in this new state of affairs. What then? What chafing, and bitterness, and secret tears. How grim to face an earthly life with Paradise past, and faith shaken. Don’t stare, the idea is not mine, I read it. You have no notion, Bab, what a toss-up it all is.’

‘I thought you liked men so much,’ dropping an egg in her surprise.

‘H-um, I get on with them, I’m not troublesome, I don’t specially like any one; I am Griffith, the safe person. A woman who likes every one, likes no one. How you hurry, Bab; you are bored to death. As a rule, a girl will sit up all night to discuss such questions; you are a dear thing, so superbly indifferent.’

Among the tea-cups in the morning-room they found Mrs. Fenwick.

‘How’s Jack?’ said Bab, plaintively, from the doorway. ‘Shall I go up to him now?’

‘No, no, he is going to sleep, he sent me away because he felt sleepy.’

‘Shall I send him up something? Where’s a book? Anything about Ka’s, scarabs, and sphinxes. Where is that Pharaoh-Fellah thing?’ searching vaguely about the writing-table.

‘It went back weeks ago to Mudie’s.’

‘Aunt Cis, have you any book on Egyptology?’

‘Is she mad, Mary? Doesn’t she know that I read nothing but French novels and society papers; it keeps

up my self-respect, for I find I'm more moral than the novels and less scurrilous than the papers. A book on Egyptology as a companion? I'll take your hint and get one, I think I should like it, I think I should like to explore Pharaoh's kitchen where they cooked dinners five thousand years before Christ, it must make one feel emphatically young and fresh. Just now, Bab, I wouldn't worry a hot-head with potsherds and pyramids; if he'd like a sphinx, go to him yourself.'

'Here is your tea, Cicely. Hand her the sandwiches, Bab.'

'Don't pull a long face, Mary. I have been very serious, I have been preaching to Bab in the fowl-house; I have done her good. Didn't you notice that she came in quite flurried about Jack? Take my advice, Bab, send him a note, something tasty to put under his pillow; say that Dr. Bedford has forbidden you to disturb him, but that with cock-crow you will be at his side. Yes, tell a fib; I always would rather tell a lie than hurt a feeling. It is a weakness which makes me popular with men.'

'But with cock-crow,' said Bab, half laughing, half worried. 'I shall be at Brierley, we are cubbing.'

'Then don't cub, give it up, stay at home,' said Mrs. Kaufmann. 'You and your clumsy gun must, between you, have done a lot of damage; bind it all up. Read Browning to him, talk sentiment, be sad, be womanly and weak, be *unnatural*. Can't you act, Bab? Most of us can do nothing but act when there are men about.'

Queen Bab stood on the rug and looked from her aunt to her mother, then again at her aunt. She was a little stunned at the serious part of the advice given to her, she was not often recommended to give up that upon which her desire was fixed. She reflected for some time before she spoke.

'If Jack would really like me to stop at home, I will stop.'

And stay at home she did; wasting the morning hours in loitering near the house, while the doctor paid his visit, and the victim of her craft was brought down once more to the improvised couch in the smoking-room.

Jack lay listening for the steps which he had been told to expect; he knew that her Majesty had not gone a-hunting, and why. Perplexed, uncertain, hot-headed, his mind was hard to balance.

Too overwrought to be tolerant, too deeply earnest to be moderate, too moved to be patient, he was in that condition of nerve which requires infinite tact—the tact of an infinite love to soothe and pacify. He was distraught by an extraordinary activity of mind, such as assails a fevered man when his body chains him to inaction.

Patience had forsaken him, he was ready to do anything rather than wait peaceably for developments.

And Bab came in to see him with every intention to please. With a blue Persian kitten in her arms and her freshest friendliest smile, she bade him a genial ‘Good-morning.’

‘Why had she stayed at home on such a charming morning?’

Of course she told the truth, never lapsing from strict fact.

‘I thought—I mean they thought you’d like to have me with you for a little while.’

‘Did you give up Brierley for *me*?’

‘Oh, it didn’t matter. I deserved anything for shooting you, Jack; you mustn’t let me off scot-free.’

The confession took away his breath for a time. He lay and watched her at play with her kitten—the gambols of the pair were well worth watching; but he saw very little charm in the scampers and the frisks.

When the zest of the kitten had waned, as it had tired of play, Bab sat down and looked at the invalid; he had

been deadly silent, she saw he was pale as ashes, and that his eyes were sunk and hollow in his head.

‘Does your knee hurt you much, Jack?’

‘No, it is nothing.’

‘Are you tired? Shall I go away?’

‘Not yet. I want to talk to you.’

She put up her hand and patted the small plaits of hair, which were bound round and round her head—a nervous gesture this, for every plait was perfectly tight and trim.

‘Jack, let me ring; you should have some soup, or something. I am sure you want your lunch; you look ill. Talk after lunch. I’ll,’ graciously, ‘I’ll come back if you want me.’

She felt uneasy. His eyes were burning. He raised himself on his elbow. He wanted something less plentiful than soup. What was the matter? She had tried to be so particularly obliging.

‘I’ll talk now, Bab. After all, there is not much to be said. My tongue has never been any good to me. You wouldn’t understand me, if you can’t *feel*. I may as well cut explanations short, for you won’t know what I mean. It is this: I am going to leave Combe—the sooner the better. All our old ideas about the future can be dug up and thrown away; they are good for nothing.’

She looked uncomfortably away, and bit her lip.

‘I don’t know what I’ve done, Jack, or why you wish to go.’

‘You have done nothing. I was as thick-headed as I am thin-skinned. I was too confident; it was my fault from the first. I see it now. However, no harm’s done as yet; we’ll turn that page of fiction down, and I’ll go out into the world, like the men of old, and seek my fortune.’

‘Why do you suddenly talk like this? I don’t see

any reason why it should be altered. Most people get on all right in double harness. We don't bicker, Jack ; you are not like some men who might turn out horrid. You are not always at brandies-and-sodas, you are not unreasonably tiresome about your food, you are not jealous, and you don't lose your temper. Your wife would be a very lucky woman ; they were saying so to me half-an-hour ago in the garden.'

Jack laughed, but even to her dull ears the laugh was not reassuring.

'No, no, she would be a most wretched woman if she were you, Bab. Not jealous? I am jealous of the very air you breathe. Let all that alone. I won't talk Greek to you, but plain English. If we were married, I should expect you to leave this place and live with me in London. I should be an intolerably intolerant, exacting husband. You are far happier as you are. There is nothing else for it, I must go.'

The kitten, wearied out with play, had nestled down in a corner of her skirt, curling itself up and falling asleep. Bab was glad to lower her eyes to the calm sight, for she did not know what to make of Jack's face.

'You are going back to London,' she said. 'It's very sudden, Jack.'

'Not very ; I knew it weeks ago.'

'I haven't changed ;' somewhat stiffly.

'Exactly so, you have not changed at all.'

Puzzled, a little angry at some faint injustice in all this, she said, slowly,

'Perhaps you are right, perhaps you think it better to be only friends, but——'

'There is no "but" for—you. Why did you say but? Are you afraid of those "climaxes" from which a wedding-ring would save you? If you married me, the "*climaxes*" would be weekly, daily, chronic, perpetual. Have you ever thrown cold water on a fire? Do you

know the unpleasant effect? Before the fire goes out there is a great commotion in the grate. I must go without the commotion, and the bugbear of memory it would leave behind it.'

'But you will come back for Christmas? We need not alter, we can forget this new sort of plan which came to nothing.'

He did not answer. She looked up anxiously into his face.

'Jack, you will come back?'

'Some day—not just yet. When I have begun to forget "this new sort of plan which came to nothing."'

'But I shall miss you, Jack.'

Her mouth quivered. She had given up her cubbing for this. Her one great friend was going away; he spoke about it as though he was speaking of a day in Exeter. It was true that Jack was careful to be moderate in speech; he did not want to distress her, nor to let her feel herself to be in the wrong. Besides which he was proud, and pride is as good as a pot of whitewash for beautifying sepulchres.

But when her lips quivered, when she said, 'But I shall miss you,' his moderation left him; he overstepped the bounds within which he had kept these many days. Words are wretched instruments of expression; overwhelming feeling never works itself out by word of mouth, the tongue stiffens, articulation fails, the brain is hampered by the mechanical part of its machinery getting out of order. A gesture, an inarticulate cry, a contorted muscle do most of the eloquent talking at a tragedy, or even at a melodrama. Therefore it was that Jack said nothing beyond a phrase which is always sweet in the hearer's ears, 'My darling, my darling,' and those well-used words were broken and indistinct. Then he put his arms round her, and drew her face to his, and kissed her gently, saying, 'God bless you, Bab, good-bye.'

And she made no remonstrance, but when she was released, said, 'Good-bye, Jack,' and hurried away from his vicinity out of the room. The startled kitten stretched itself, and waddling to the hearth, finished its nap there.

Bab was several minutes late for lunch; she came in with heightened colour and shifting eyes. She had the burden of a secret; it was not heavy but it weighed on her mind, and she did not relish meeting Mrs. Kaufmann's keen eyes. However, nobody seemed to scent change or trouble in the air; the rattle of knives and forks went on as usual, so Bab settled down to her lunch with a good will, a little surprised and ashamed to find that she could still eat.

But it was difficult to realize that one Combe inmate was going away until his room was empty, his place void, his voice silent, and he had actually gone. There would be time to miss such a person when he was out of reach: she would put off missing so long as possible. When a friend went of his own free will, he did not deserve to be missed.

CHAPTER XV.

What? Gone without a word?

Ay, so true love should go: it cannot speak.

Two Gentlemen of Verona.

'A small cloud may hide both sun and moon.'

WHEN the world is asleep, and you keep your watch in a sick-room, it may chance that your duty sets you to the boiling of a cup of milk for your charge.

You soon see the way in which the warmth works on the soft white fluid, how first a ruffled fringe of irritation comes and goes, playing round the edges of the saucepan. Later waves of heat rock the glowing

milk; bubbles from below come fizzing to the top: now the time has arrived when a trained hand should set the angry, agitated, reckless mass on a hob to cool and recover.

Should the opportune moment be missed the boil-up will become the boil-over, and there will be a disastrous overflow of that spilt milk over which, we are often reminded, 'tis waste of time to weep.

Somewhat after the manner of milk our passions boil over. Jack's emotions had boiled over, there had been no watcher to place him on the hob to simmer down to a marketable temperature, and to prevent the burning, or waste of good material.

After luncheon Mrs. Kaufmann and Bab had driven off to see some distant neighbours, whilst Captain and Mrs. Fenwick after paying the smoking-room a visit had pottered amongst their shrubs and flowers, their live-stock and their hot-houses, discussing, as they loved to do, the improvements, the alterations for the perfecting of this dear home of theirs, about which they planned together.

Godfray had a day off the multitudinous 'Meetings' which now-a-days over-filled his idle hours, and he gave it to his wife; she appreciated the gift, and on into the dusk they strolled, and talked, and dawdled out the happy afternoon.

When at length they turned their sauntering steps homewards, they found the Woodbury chariot at the door, and within the hall a bustle of portmanteaux and servants. Lady Young's declamatory voice reached their ears, addressing Thomas.

'Some one must go at once and look for Mrs. Fenwick. Mr. Holland wishes to see her before we start.'

Lady Young had experienced what small children call 'a great surprise' that afternoon. She had driven over to Combe on purpose to suggest her son's removal to

Woodbury, she had said 'that it seemed a little hard that she should be tortured with anxiety six miles off, as the crow flies, from her poor sick boy,' and her poor sick boy had not contradicted her.

'Did she want him at Woodbury?'

'Would not any mother long for her child in time of trouble?'

'He was quite ready to go to Woodbury, he would go back with her in the carriage at once. If she would ring the bell, he would order his portmanteau packed.'

His line of conduct astounded her, she had prepared to take a grievance home with her, but she had not dreamed of taking her son.

Astonishment was lost in gratification when she found how Captain and Mrs. Fenwick received the announcement she made to them, in triumphant staccato, in the porch.

'Jack going?' Of course it was the master of the house who let out his rancorous feelings, the guile and duplicity of his wife made her hold her tongue. 'Going without his doctor's leave? Going when he had been ordered perfect repose, absolute quiet? It was a heinously suicidal thing to do. Captain Fenwick hoped'—the hope was a threat—'that Jack would not be seriously injured by such folly.'

Lady Young sighed; 'But what was to be done?'

'Of course,' she said, 'I know to what such a wound may lead: amputation, lock-jaw, gangrene are common consequences of so disastrous an accident. But in pain, illness, or suffering, a son naturally turns to his home, to his mother. I long to have him under my own roof, and he longs to come.'

Jack was in earshot now; he came hobbling out to the carriage, helped on either side by a sympathetic hand, pale as a ghost and emphatically cheerful.

His hostess's deep eyes, shadowed, but very kindly,

looked into his ; she had a knack perfected by practice of reading the minds of her nearest and dearest.

And she hurried the start ; she knew what she was about, no doubt, though she took her husband's breath away, for she speeded her parting guest. She herself, with her skilful hands, settled the deserter scientifically in the landau, and held his hand in hers, and wrung it as she spoke her last, low words.

'Good-bye, Jack, and take care, and be patient. You won't be—like this—for long, it will be better soon—*only* be *patient*.'

She stood watching the carriage as it turned the sweep of the drive, and dwindled out of sight in the dusky shade of the afternoon.

'Come along in, Mary. I believe the shock has stunned you. What a woman that is, lugging off the poor chap when he isn't fit to be moved. Upon my soul, I've been living with you for a quarter of a century and I've not plumbed you yet. You can hold your own as a rule ; I thought you'd stop the whole thing, but no, you were as soft as butter. Very odd of Jack—I say, Mary, wasn't it very odd of Jack to bolt off at a moment's notice?'

'I don't think he——' She went over to the tea-table, not finishing her sentence.

'Off his head, I should say. He looks like a corpse.'

'I don't think he is off his head, but she—she always acts as an irritant upon him.'

The break in his wife's voice sent her lord to his feet at her side.

'Do you mind, Mary? Are you distressing yourself? You held your tongue, so I held mine. Why didn't you give me a cue? I'd have put my fist down and quashed the whole idea.'

'*Your* fist, Godfray,' taking the member in question between her hands as if it was a most important factor

in her life, though she was about to disparage it—‘Your fist would have quashed nothing. Neither you nor I are any good. The best that we two old fogies can do is to shut our eyes, and hold our tongues. It seems hard, it is hard that Bab gets off without a scratch, and that he, poor man, should have the heartache.’

Once, long ago, Captain Fenwick had been the hero of a romance, but even in those by-gone days he had been neither a romantic nor a sentimental hero. He had always spoken out, he had never thrown dust over fact, magnified fancy, nor minced matters.

‘What? Have they had a row?’

‘You know you put this mighty fist of yours down a few days ago. Jack felt it at the time, and now we have just seen him drive away. Why do you think he went? It is plain enough.’

‘You suspect there has been an uproar? And the whole thing is over?’

‘I am sure of it.’

‘What’s to be done?’

‘Nothing, absolutely nothing. He has gone, he won’t come back. She will be content without him, he was very little to her.’

‘Why on earth didn’t she say so, and not play the fool?’

‘Godfray, Bab played nothing, she does not know the way to play. She is ready to marry him to-morrow, but she is not in love, not in touch with him. You can imagine the sort of thing Jack has had to endure.’

‘Umph. Are they going to wreck everything on that sunken rock?’

‘It is a rock where love-affairs have often come to grief.’

When Captain Fenwick heard this split in his household catalogued under the serio-comic name of ‘love-affair,’ he took the matter more lightly, and asked for his tea.

From the comfortable common-sense period of middle age so many of the tragedies of lads and lassies seem trivial as the tragedies of the nursery. From the far end of the telescope, men look back upon the objects on the path they trod in the past and see them dwarfed, they forget their true size. Captain Fenwick's heart was young, but points of view change vastly with the changing years.

'Poor Jack, I never was more annoyed in my life; it is time the girl was married, and he is the very sort of fellow to make her happy and look after her. Another cup of tea, Mary. But I shan't give it up yet awhile, perhaps she is going to take a page out of her mother's book, and refuse her fences till she's driven him beside himself.'

Very soon the culprit and Mrs. Kaufmann came into the room; the former wore no guilty air, but listened in silence to her aunt's quick questions. It seemed that they had met with Mr. Campbell, that Mr. Campbell had seen the Woodbury chariot, through the open window of which he was positive he had caught sight of Jack Holland.

'I told him that it was impossible for him to have done so. I told him that Jack is to lie by for ages, that he had had no business to leave his bed, and that Dr. Bedford was mad at his having done so.'

Bab was carrying tea-cake to the speaker. She paused midway, and listened to her mother's condensed explanation of the invalid's departure, as though the news hardly surprised her. Three pairs of eyes observed her closely, they fancied she was a shade less debonair, a thought less blithe, they hoped she ate her crumpet slowly, and without relish. This hope was extinguished when she went to the tea-table and deliberately chose the most buttery scone; it was abominable of her to have chosen that particular scone.

Instead of going off to her chickens or to the stable, Bab waited on in the morning-room until her father and his sister-in-law left her alone with Mrs. Fenwick ; then she went over to the dusky window-seat, and fired her shot from there.

‘We had an anti-climax, mother, and that is the reason why Jack has gone.’

‘I thought so. I’m very sorry, Bab.’

‘So am I.’

Generally Bab’s news came out whole, with no reserves and nothing left to tell, but she held her tongue now and wanted questioning.

‘Why did you choose such an unfortunate time as this to drive him away? A time when he had so much to forgive you, Bab.’

‘It wasn’t anything to do with me. I didn’t want him to go. I never was so astonished in my life. He didn’t seem to mind, he just said it didn’t do, it didn’t answer, he’d rather forget all about the idea of being married to me and go back to the old days. No doubt he knows what it all means better than I do.’

There was chagrin in her voice.

‘Your father and I are terribly disappointed—the end has been too abrupt.’

‘I suppose a smash is always abrupt, it is only a crack that is gradual. An engagement,’ thoughtfully, ‘may take weeks and months coming to pass, and then it is all gone to pieces like this in a moment.’

‘We shall miss him, Bab. I don’t think you realize what it will be without Jack backwards and forwards, in and out, like one of our own ; dear fellow.’

‘I don’t see how one can realize things which have never happened. But, of course, I know that I shall miss him.’

Then she went out of the room and out of doors ; it was waste of time to discuss such a complicated mystery as a lover.

But her three elders talked in and out the maze, and round about the maze untiringly, they moaned and mourned,—it is the only consolation the impotent on-lookers at a deplorable affair of this sort can have.

Narrowly they watched the dear daughter of the house as she pursued her daily round of robust delights. Alas ! there were no dreamy moments, no pensive eyes, no flights of unfounded merriment, no bitterness, no restlessness, not one blessed sign of weakness to reward their scrutiny.

Jack had gone. It was a pity, as a blight on fruit-trees, a rot in potatoes, or distemper in the kennel are pities ; but she did not make a fuss over either evil. Jack was out of sight, he had often been out of sight before and had come back again. If he could no longer ride with, and talk to, and squire Miss Fenwick, there was always some one about who took his place.

But she would not discuss the absentee ; his name fell out of the general conversation, although every evening she asked, during dinner,

‘What news from Woodbury?’

And when she was told that the knee was bad, and that Dr. Bedford thought gravely of it, she said, ‘I am very sorry to hear that,’ and talked of something else.

Later, when the account of the invalid improved, when Captain Fenwick said that he had walked a hundred paces, with only a stick to help him, upon the drive at Woodbury that morning, Bab changed her commentary to,

‘I’m very glad to hear that.’

This commentary lasted for a week. Then came fresh news, better still, perfectly reassuring.

Mrs. Fenwick had had tea at the Youngs’ that afternoon. Jack was going to London on Monday, he was looking quite himself. He had had a brief, ‘about which Lady Young talked,’ said Mrs. Fenwick, ‘as

though a brief was a most extraordinary appendage to a barrister, and one which you would least expect to find in connection with his profession.' From this remark people concluded that there had been some slight unpleasantness during the visit to Woodbury.

The following day (Saturday), Bab came home from cubbing late for luncheon; though she had been out since eight o'clock in a blustering wind she was not spent, but blithe, fresh, and more than usually alert. She hurried over her lunch, and rushed off to change her habit, reappearing in an incredibly short time, clad in a neat Harris tweed gown and a light coat of many capes, innumerable pockets, and monster buttons; a felt hat of puritanical plainness was tilted over her sunny eyes.

'Mother,' she said, clearing her throat, 'I'm just going to drive over to Woodbury. Mother, you are not in the chamber of horrors, why do you glare at me?'

But still Mrs. Fenwick looked at her in wonder.

'To Woodbury? Now? You are going to-day? You surprise me.'

'I want to see Jack before he goes. I should think it would surprise you more if I let him go away without saying good-bye.'

She broke off in momentary embarrassment.

'I don't see why I should not see him again.'

'Think of him, Bab. Under the circumstances, is it possible that he should care for a farewell visit from you? Alethea will be with him. His mother may be there. It may be awkward. Don't go.'

'I don't think it need be awkward; it never has been awkward. And I'm sure Jack will be very glad to see me.'

'Dear, you can't throw away your cake and then re-cook and eat it; he feels far too much to be glad to see you. Leave well alone. Lady Young is sus-

picious ; she may be rude. He will hate that. Let him go in peace.'

'But *I* want to see him, and I'll lay any odds that he wants to see me. I've got some songs to take to him ; and he has my fly-book, I must get that. Now, mother, I know you are as wise as Solomon, but I'm going, because it will be all right.'

Where did this headstrong, heart-whole daughter of Mary Fenwick come from? She lacked pride (of which her mother had had an unfortunate abundance), with many other maidenly possessions. Then she, who was chary of caresses, silenced Mrs. Fenwick's lips with a swift kiss, and the elder woman said no more.

Bab was of age, she must judge for herself. Advice is about as profitable as a share in a Cornish mine ; nothing but 'experience, the school-master who takes such dreadfully high wages,' can teach youth. Mrs. Fenwick stood at her window, calming her eyes with the peace of the eternal hills, and casting her mind back to her first few months of life at Combe. Perhaps, after all, the girl was right, and that however startling, however unwholesome, however painful that meeting at Woodbury might be, yet to see the desire of his eyes, and to hear the sound of her voice might, if only for some insane seconds, rejoice the heart of that young man and make him 'very glad.'

She sighed over that form of 'very gladness.'

Jack, when Mrs. Fenwick had seen him of late, had not spoken of anything more stirring than his health, the weather, and the 'news.' Indeed, there had been no opportunity for confidences, for Alethea had been in and out of the room, and Lady Young had glued herself and her prickly tongue at the side of his sofa.

Heigh-ho ! Mrs. Fenwick watched the cart turn the corner of the drive, and stood there watching, thinking, vaguely hoping, and wasting good, valuable time in worry.

For the idle moments of which, at a Great Day, we must give account, how many, alack ! have been flung away in the vast, useless, bottomless abyss of Worry.

CHAPTER XVI.

'Sweet, thou hast trod on a heart,
Pass ! There's a world full of men,
And women as fair as thou art
Must do such things now and then.

Thou only has stepped unaware,
Malice not one can impute :
And why should a heart have been there
In the way of a fair woman's foot ?'

'It is not easy to straighten in the oak the crook that grew in
the sapling.'

With all becoming deference to his superiority, his advantages, his greatness in many walks of life, yet it has been whispered among women-folk that as a casual invalid man is not great, he is not grand, he does not excel.

The pre-eminent sex do not take amiably to being 'poor dears.' Coddling, compassion, care, and specially remedial measures are distasteful to them. As serious sufferers men have shone creditably ; but *out-of-sorts*—a man who is merely *out-of-sorts* is pitiable, despondent, the butt not even the servant of his fate.

The knee at Woodbury was a grim ailment, and there were other ailments yet more austere which filled the dragging days with pain, such as would allow Jack no relaxation in which to let himself go and luxuriate in grumbles and murmurs.

He was no dismal Jimmy with a long face, a putty eye, a martyr's voice, and a rooted determination that he was 'no better.' The worst his mother could find to exasperate her step-daughter by saying was,

‘That Jack was as depressing as the weather.’

But the illness was a grave one, and he took it gravely. The times were bad with him, and for the first ten days the efforts made to improve them by his attentive nurse were not successful.

Alethea devoted herself to him. Her one fault, alas ! was an incurable ill—she was the wrong woman. It seemed to him that the wrongness affected everything—when he wanted to think, she read to him ; when he tried to brood, she set herself to keep his thoughts moving ; when he felt fractious, she argued with him ; when he closed his eyes for a nap, she brought him his soup ; when he longed for solitude, she kept him company.

For the first week, trying to be decently grateful was as hard as trying to keep his temper.

Then Jack grew saner and less self-absorbed. He began to understand that she was not trying to irritate him ; he began to like the flowers she brought him, and to look forward to the soup. He was a sympathetic man, and he soon found himself once more capable of wincing at the snubs dealt her, and dreading the eternal bickerings which came and went with his mother. These verbal mustard-poultices set on his personal ills, were no doubt as wholesome and curative as they were hot and offensive.

For a day or two a sick-room had been a novelty, and then Lady Young haunted it. Later on, Alethea was left in sole possession save when the Combe people paid their daily visit, during which Lady Young sat by Jack’s side, superintending the interview, and making a dread ceremony of that hour of the endless twenty-four for which alone, at this weak stage of his life, her son existed.

Womanlike, Alethea’s perceptions were acute, but she was loth to allow her friends to guess the full extent

of their acuteness. She never scared people, as some women will, by anticipating an intended confidence, calling the cat by name before the owner has opened the neck of the bag.

Jack never knew that Bab herself had sharpened Alethea's perceptions, but it came about that before ten days had passed he had opened his heart to his intelligent nurse. Then he grew greedy of her company ; he poured into her luckless ears, from sun to sun, the same old story ; ' Bab, Bab, Bab,' was the theme of the immortal tale.

And Alethea listened patiently. Her attention did not wander ; if she said little, he forgave her, for the little she did say had not been altogether to his mind.

Later, when he was up and out of his room, he wished that he had held his tongue. Why had he not been self-contained, reserved ? Not like the men, indeed, with whom he associated, but like those others, the heroes in books, of whom he read, and with whose secrets the reader alone was on terms of intimate knowledge.

As he lay, tied by the leg, it had been hard to prevent his seething mind from overflow, but as Alethea could not appreciate her Majesty, as she seemed zealous to drop the sacred subject, he kept silence about it and took to reading aloud poetry to his comrade, talking when he did talk of abstract subjects, and only cruising about the Fenwicks perpetually, without touching upon the daughter of the house.

On Monday he was going back to London ; on the Saturday afternoon preceding his departure, with rugs and chairs and cushions, pen and ink, books and papers all ready to his hand, he ensconced himself in the conservatory. Without, the garden was a damp and dreary wilderness, full of decay and death, good for nothing save for the tillers of the soil to earn their daily bread in.

The raw blustering discomforts of cloudy November were not aggressive here amongst the mimosas, amongst the brilliant flowers and bursting bulbs. Jack took his prescribed exercise, pacing up and down the long avenue of flowers, and pausing at the doorway to look down the meandering drive beyond which, shut out by many hills and oaks, lay the West Hill, belted darkly with tall firs, and decorated with a grey Elizabethan house shrouded in creepers.

‘Were I a cloud I’d gather
My skirts up in the air,
And go I well know whither,
And fly I well know where.’

But he was not a cloud, he could not die in happy raindrops upon any waterproof suiting, therefore he would go to Combe no more; no more.

To the tune of ‘The Girl I left behind me,’ practised feet march cheerily enough. Jack knew that this was the case, in time it might be his case, but his feet were heavy as lead as they paced the tiled pavement of the conservatory to and fro.

He opened the *Times* and read a leading article on Combe, he cut a new *Temple Bar* and found a story solely about Bab. He tried to write a letter and his sentences were blocked with Bab, stultified with her. Then he held up his head and listened; here she came, only one pair of wheels in the universe could roll so light, so fleet, only one quartette of hoofs could pelt at such a pace.

Jack’s eyes and ears had taken to playing cruel tricks with him, they had cheated him of late, awake and asleep; he did not altogether believe in them now. But he opened the glass-door wide and stood there, with bare head, listening. The sounds were real, substantial, for up the drive came the cart, her cart, *his* cart, the driver sitting high and square, with erect head; this was the

real thing, it was her Majesty, and she must pass him on her way.

He had dethroned her, and he had told himself that he would be perfectly calm if ever such a meeting as this should come about ;—he was calm enough, save for all sorts of unsuspected pulses which throbbed about his head.

She had but brought a civil message of inquiry ? She was merely there to leave a note ? She thought him already gone ? He bore the pang of these three deductions, and then—she saw him where he stood. She was in a line with him by that time, and, drawing the horse up short upon his haunches, she waved her hand.

No reasonable doubt remained, he was the person whom Bab sought. She was out of the cart now, and giving Phil his directions.

‘Don’t put up, drive up and down ; I shan’t be long.’

She had come two steps towards Jack when she turned again, looking up at the sky and round the horizon.

‘I think it’s beginning to drizzle, Phil ; put the waterproof apron over the seat.’

As she gave these directions, a certain wild leaping under the spectator’s ribs tamed down.

‘How are you, Jack ?’

She was not constrained, the only sign of the times was a slight blush as she reached his side, stretching out her hand in warm greeting.

‘Perfectly all right, thanks.’

The people at home had contrived to make her feel guilty of grave offence ; she looked at him as critically as did his doctor, he certainly seemed much as usual, though his hair was longer than ever.

‘What a nice little crib you’ve rigged up in here ;’ stepping through the door which he held open, and preceding him, but with her head turned to mark his gait. ‘Is your knee really well, Jack ? You are dead lame.’

‘A bit stiff, nothing more.’

Like its proprietor, who had developed some knack for keeping her at arm’s length.

‘I hear you are going to London on Monday, I came to say good-bye;’ feeling for the first time that some explanation of her arrival was necessary.

‘I am very glad to see you again.’

A commonplace remark which his voice made imposing.

‘Where are your people?’

‘They are entertaining a lot of Hughes and Hardings.’

‘Will they come here?’

‘I shouldn’t think so.’

‘That’s all right,’ she said, pleasantly, seating herself in his deck-chair under a palm. ‘I mean that I can’t stay long, and I only wanted you.’

The young green Roman hyacinths set to ringing joy-bells in his ears.

‘Do you know that you have my fly-book, Jack? Where did you put it? I told mother to ask you, but she forgot;’ the hyacinth bells stopped their offensive jangling. ‘Don’t you remember that you promised to stock it and to catalogue it? Of course I don’t want it now. But bring it when you come.’

‘It is somewhere with mine. I will look for it, and send it.’

She smiled, a wide sunny smile of conciliation.

‘Don’t send it, bring it when you come.’

‘I am—not coming.’

‘I shan’t want it till March. You will,’ the ‘will’ was singularly persuasive, ‘be down for Christmas. One brief won’t take you six months.’

‘I am going abroad at Christmas.’

For one very long minute Bab considered this intelligence. Jack had certainly set up some barrier between himself and her, over which she tried to vault.

‘I didn’t like to worry you, Jack, with saying, “How

sorry I was, how very sorry, how dreadfully sorry." I thought you would have understood.'

'I understood perfectly.'

'The children's puppy at the lodge is lame too. What a clumsy person I am.'

'You mustn't call yourself names; the puppy got in the way of the wheel, so he deserved to be trampled on.'

'Mrs. Basten has not made any excuses for me, she called me in there yesterday, and told me pretty straight what she thought of me. "Dawnt 'ee gally volk wi' all zorts wot idden vit vur maidens. Dawnt 'ee düet, lave off, avore yü be avorced tü."'

Bab spoke the dialect like a native, she looked at Jack to laugh and he did laugh.

'Jack, I wish you'd say what you mean, because I know you're angry, and it would let off all the steam and start fair.'

These overtures of hers did more harm than good; if she had been capable of understanding the mere rudiments of his feeling, would she have reiterated sorrow for the shot as though that was her offence? and would she have come for that disastrous fly-book?

Alethea had thrown many a gentle pat of dirt at her Majesty, they were more likely to adhere than the formidable lumps of mud his mother hurled, and none of which stuck at all.

Me, me, me, could Bab talk of no one else?

Why should she talk of any one else? she was the centre of the universe, the subject of which he would feign talk and think, year in year out, till Doomsday.

'Jack, you are angry.'

'No,' he said. 'I told you how it was last time I saw you. You don't want to have it all over again, there's nothing new to say. I don't want to curse and swear, and talk more Greek. You wouldn't like it, and it would do no good.'

That wild, demonstrative farewell of his at Combe made small impression upon her compared with his determination that this good-bye was final, that he meant to go and was going, for this attitude of his made her suspect herself of having done wrong.

Since her coral-and-sock days of babyhood Jack had known hers for a large and generous mind. If she could be convinced of her error, she was eager to own herself sorry.

To some eyes penitence seems a sign of weakness, not strength ; humility is a quality which exists solely to be trampled upon, a man down invites a kick. Embarrassed, apologetic, a giant may be hunted into a corner and yapped at with impunity.

These were the views of Lady Young, and she came into the garden at this juncture followed by her guests, and hemmed in the unfortunate pair in the conservatory. Finding that Miss Fenwick was uneasy, nervous, quenchable, Lady Young set to work to speak out as Mrs. Basten had spoken out ; she attacked Bab and routed her with slaughter. Bab was at a loss for words, she had never before found herself in need of fence or parry, she stood and received the elder lady's attack in silence and surprise.

Then, as she had the enviable faculty for being 'perfectly natural,' she gathered herself together, perfect nature prompting her to make a bolt for her cart.

'I could not wait for tea,' she said, looking appealingly at Jack for help. 'It will rain, it is getting dusk.'

'Why not put up ? As you have come all the way to see Jack, you should not hurry off. Jack, remind her that no duck is afraid of wet weather !'

'I must get back,' her eyes still on her only friend at this alien court.

'It is Saturday,' of course Jack came to her rescue, speeding the parting guest as he had been speeded once

at Combe, 'it is a stable grievance to be late on Saturday. Good-bye.'

'Don't go out, Jack, you were warned against a chill. Miss Fenwick will excuse you.'

Only too gladly, he saw, was she ready to excuse him. The grey, creeping mist entombed her as she hurried away, and the clatter of tongues drowned the last roll of the wheels.

It was a Woodbury custom to discuss a person who had quitted the roof-tree as soon as she or he were out of earshot, and the womenkind settled like living bees on Bab; they 'broke her bones afore ever she was at the bottom' of the drive.

Lovers are not divinely reasonable, nor severely logical; the trivial holes picked in Bab by his visitors drove Jack into a frenzy of adoration for the maligned.

She might be selfish, unimpressionable, spoilt, she might be loving or she might be loth, whatever she might be, whatever she was, she poured fire into his heart and smoke into his head, and he loved the hem of that frightful waterproof skirt of hers better than a universe of womanly, well-disciplined, and willing maidens.

It took him all he knew to reason himself calm. Reason is, one is sometimes tempted to fancy, a doubtful blessing, a certain care. Instinct is no charge to its owner, there is no responsibility in its possession.

Now, whilst reason was under Jack's control, he knew it would be well for him to get away, to get to work, to soul-saving, heart-salving work; he was ready to be envious of the pick, barrow, and shovel of a navvy. On Monday he was about to put two hundred good miles of solid earth 'twixt him and—Woodbury, 'twixt him and home, 'twixt him and folly.

CHAPTER XVII.

Out, out, into the open air
The only dream is liberty,
Thou carest little how or where.

LONGFELLOW.

‘Neighbour once over the hedge, neighbour over it again.’

‘I’VE heard from Jack,’ said Miss Fenwick, at the breakfast-table, looking thoughtfully at a letter, and dropping it down on the cloth beside her plate of savoury omelette. ‘He is as repressive and stand-off as a monkey-tree.’

Mr. Holland had not been at Combe for many weeks, yet his name was constantly on the lips there. Captain Fenwick quoted him diligently.

‘An admirable growth a monkey-tree,’ said her father, under his breath. ‘More appreciated by most women than a weeping-willow. What,’ aloud, ‘has he written about?’

‘You know I asked him to get my new saddle. It’s precisely what I wanted; but nothing came with it except the bill. I did think he might have written a line, and when I thanked him I told him so. Here is the answer.’ She tossed the letter on to the crockery behind the urn. ‘You read it, mother.’

This was it :

‘MY DEAR BAB,—I did not understand you wanted anything besides the saddle. I am glad it is satisfactory. Don’t apologize for trouble; something to do is exactly the thing for which I am on the look-out: very hard to find in this country: over in the Far East we “paid liars” get an earlier chance. Many thanks for renewing your invitation for Christmas, but I’m going to Cairo with Mitchel-Innes on the 20th, *en route* for the potsherds. Mrs. Kaufmann was good enough to ask me to

dine last week, but I could not manage it. I have not seen her since you were up. You seem by all accounts to be having a lively time down in the west. I heard of you all from Peel.—Yours as ever,

‘JACK H.’

Mrs. Fenwick read the last sentence over four times, and digested it uneasily.

‘That letter is not like Jack, mother.’

‘People’s letters are seldom like them,’ treating the question generally. ‘I often wonder which is genuine, the manner of the letter or the manner of its writer; because they are, sometimes, so totally different.’

‘Jack only came once to the flat all the time I was with the Kaufmanns.’

‘I should let Jack alone,’ said her father, holding out his hand for this public epistle. ‘He has had a rough time; you hurt him with your horse-play. If you shoot a man, you can’t hang him in your larder as you would have hung that woodcock.’

‘He,’ Bab was always talking of Jack, but agreed with nobody’s opinion about him, and had only contradictory theories of her own to offer in their place, ‘is unsociable.’

‘We poor men can’t let our hair down, and our waists out, and wring our hands, and bury our faces in pocket-handkerchiefs; so, when we are down on our luck, we get unsociable, short in temper and beastly unsociable.’

‘Jack is not down on his luck.’

Mrs. Fenwick did not raise her hand to heal the breach between Bab and this young gentleman; but her husband was, and had been ever since the rupture, intent on manufacturing a plan for entrapping his daughter’s evasive heart on Jack’s account. His schemes had ‘gone a-gley.’

Early in December Captain Fenwick had found out

that he and Mary must pay a long-deferred visit to the Ogilvies at Woodcote, and that, during the fortnight they were away, Bab had better go to her aunt's flat in Kensington.

And thither Bab had gone. She was out of her element in London; after a week amongst the houses her spirits and the roses on her cheeks had waned. She put lack of 'go' down to the fogs, the pavements, the gas, and the noise: but the people, the many strange people who came and went, who talked of things in which she had no part, who levelled her to country-cousin rank, impressing her own insignificance upon her, had something to say to her depression.

At first, when she found herself amongst the Kaufmanns' friends, her easy conversation had flowed as it was wont to do at home, but no one had seemed to find her pleasant, nor were the remarks she made always answered; it was evident that a country-cousin who expected people to talk on her own subjects was a bore,—a strange woman was a bore.

After the first week spent under these strange auspices, Bab listened more and talked less. Mrs. Kaufmann left her niece 'to do exactly what she liked.' There seemed to be nothing within her reach that she did exactly like; she felt flat and 'out of it.'

Bab's skin was not thick, nor her self-confidence deeply rooted; it was chiefly because no one had ever found fault with her that she had concluded there was no fault to find.

A ball was in prospect; nothing very smart at that time of year, but Mrs. Kaufmann showed a keen anxiety about Bab's appearance, as infectious as it was disquieting.

The intolerable thought that her hair is dressed somewhat too low, and her skirt fashioned an inch too skimpy, weighs like a crime upon the mind of a conscientious

woman. Rawle and her mistress had an anxious time over the white satin gown. A criticized possession looks ill in its owner's eyes.

'What a washed-out rag I look, Rawle,' Miss Fenwick said, resignedly; she had been dressing for an hour, and was dissatisfied with the result. 'Hold up that candle. I can't think why electric light is always near the ceiling, you can't see anything in the glass. I hate my hair like this, it will dance down, I'm quite sure it will dance down.'

But when Bab had got to the ball, she found that she had no need of worrying herself over the possibility of dancing her hair down.

The ball-room was small and much overcrowded. A nervous little man, to whom she was introduced by her aunt, assured her that 'dancing was out of the question,' and when she insisted upon attempting it, he got away from her as soon as he decently could do so. Consequently she was left alone, and presently found ample time to reflect and observe.

At home, in her crevice of the universe, every face, every voice, and most of the clothes were familiar. Here were thronged nice-looking people whom she did not know, and who did not care to know her. No men came flocking to fill and refill her blank card. Envious girls stood near, whom beautiful, slim, well-groomed partners claimed and hurried off.

Miss Fenwick had stood through so many dances that she got on her hostess's nerves, which hostess bickered a little in a pleasant way with a lazy, good-looking friend about the poor wallflower, and within her earshot. 'That poor girl in white, she's really quite nice-looking, and she hasn't stirred once. Do be kind, Charlie, do.' But 'Charlie' was obdurate, and finally took a turn with the hostess herself by way of quieting her.

Somewhat sobered by all this—her self-esteem was not

sufficient to allow her to be amused—Bab had addressed her neighbour, a chaperon, hoping to cheat her hostess into thinking that she liked conversation better than waltzing, but the woman addressed looked surprised, and put this unsuccessful damsel into her lowly place by a curt answer.

Beginning to feel burdened with her own immovable presence, Bab had thought to thread her way out upon the staircase in search for Mrs. Kaufmann, or for an imaginary friend.

But a wedged mass of congested polka traffic had blocked her road; she had looked forlornly at the struggling dancers, longing to join their fray. Then in the heart of the crowd she had seen a familiar face, suddenly she had seen a friend in this inhospitable wilderness, his eyes had met hers. With a spontaneous, brilliant smile she had recognized him, nodding an eager, friendly welcome.

Henceforth Miss Fenwick was not upon any one's nerves, she took to dancing; dance after dance she might have been seen with a dapper little man who appropriated her. Mr. Stanhope Peel was a fellow-traveller in a strange land, he was not a proud person; if Bab had not jumped at him as a husband, she had jumped at him as a partner that night, and it was 'awfully good luck running up against her in the squash.'

His sister, Mrs. Dalrymple, with whom he was staying, had brought him to this dance; she was a woman of sense; she had watched the pair, and the next day she had called upon Mrs. Kaufmann. The remainder of Bab's visit to town was pleasant enough; she rode with Mr. Peel, and Mrs. Dalrymple took her out to theatres, and she had enjoyed herself almost as well as though she had been at home.

No grudge was borne her by Mr. Peel, he had an idea that a girl who had pluck enough to refuse him

must be a girl in a million; and Bab gave herself no airs about it, she ignored that letter of his; she was just 'as jolly' as she had been before the crisis. There was no nonsense about her: she did not care about any 'sentimental rot.' Her domestic and commercial value were alike desirable. If she could only be brought to see things in his light, what a thoroughly good sort of couple they might make.

He liked a country life himself, much preferred it. Though he was an eldest son his father was but twenty-five years his senior, and as hale as one of his own oaks.

Who could tell how long his son might have to wait for Tregarvis? who could tell whether the heavy charges on the place would ever permit him to live there?

And Mr. Peel liked Bab quite as well as he liked anybody, except himself; he knew quarters at Combe were first-rate; old Fenwick was a nice, easy-going old chap, with a good stable and an excellent cook. The hunting was execrable, but they must get off to the shires for the winter.

Mrs. Dalrymple was heart and soul in the project, she raved about Miss Fenwick—a small fortune, of course, but of quite a useful size. Stanhope must, indeed, be off courting to the west and throw over all other engagements.

And Stanhope fell in with her views. Nearly every fellow got married sooner or later, it could not be an arduous task to get a woman to wife, but he wished Bab was less like quicksilver: it was hard to get a hand on her anywhere.

Her farewell was not reassuring. He worried down early all the way to Waterloo to see her off: he had told her he would be there. He thought all women liked to be at the station half-an-hour before their train started, but Bab rushed her departure; she had come and gone without breathing-time. He seemed to have

seen little save smoke and heard nothing but whistle, he had had no time to say anything serious.

Disappointing Bab had come home just as she had gone, there was no sort of change about her. One of her masculine attributes was her wretched faculty for disclosing intelligence. She did not return with an array of assorted fragments of detail dove-tailed into an interesting story ; any item of news had to be questioned out of her. Not that she was reserved as was her mother, it was not that. But there was always something pleasant to be done in the immediate future, so that she never wished to re-enjoy the past. She had no time to make inexpensive fun out of the small incidents of life, all her amusements were legitimate, recognized amusements. She was by no means observant, unless it rained she never saw a cloud.

‘Yes, she had seen Jack, he had come to tea, he had got his case, and he had sent messages to everybody.’

That was all the satisfaction Captain Fenwick’s strategy had won. Later Mrs. Kaufmann wrote. She owned a ready pen as well as a ready tongue—this dual possession is by no means a common one—and she was in the habit of writing pages of what Godfray called ‘nothing in particular,’ over which Mary was wont to pore, reading between the lines, and trying to make out in what mood the sprightly pages had been filled.

For Mary knew her sister well, too well. There were great shadows in life, the eternal fluttering from the pursuing shade must be weary work for a creature not born a genuine butterfly through and through.

The letter that came this time was marked *Private*, and ran thus :

‘MY DEAREST MARY,

‘I did my best and failed. Of course Godfray said very little, but I understood ; Jack used to be

tractable, open to influence, but of course now that he is in love *nous avons changé tout cela*. The backings, the startings, the rearings, the jibbing of a man in his case baulk any would-be helper. Imagine a sensitive plant's sensations if clipped by Basten's blunt shears into a peacock—and draw, you know what parallel case. Bab saw nothing, suspected nothing, she was bored as I meant her to be; I ignored her myself, and you know how ready people are to follow a bad example, so they sat on her politely. But my *coup* was a grim failure. As soon as Jack heard that she was at the De Crespignys' dance he went home; so I suppose, for I never saw him, but I found her with Stanhope Peel perfectly satisfied, and with him, alas, alas! she has spent most of these last days. Will she slide into being Mrs. Peel? Sliding (I know all about sliding) means slippery ground on which one may chance to trip. There is no sliding on the break-neck obstacle course that used to be called true love. She is a most provoking young person, she just takes what comes like a happy child, not philosophically. The day will come, I suppose, when she must take life with a wry face, on faith, as we take it—and our medicine! However, Mr. Peel is a harmless, conventional man, and he may be the right one. It is no use trying to play at Providence, it is as unprofitable as the dear "*pretend*" game of one's childhood. Most marriages are a misfit, never just what we had been led to expect. You know the "cherishing" and "worshipping" and "endowing-with-all-the-worldly-goods" of the wedding-service mislead youth. We are not "worshipped" or "cherished" for long, and we are expected to keep the books low, even if we don't pay them. You are furious by this time, yes, yes, yes, the people who have evil moments choose to believe that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth and doeth little else. You may believe what you like! This is a grumble at

Jack ; he's like a pin, for his head will never let him go too far. Well, stave off Stanhope if you can, if not make the best of it—it's the thing we have to make large supplies of in this planet.

‘Your affectionate sister,

‘CICELY KAUFMANN.’

This letter had come days ago, and nothing further had as yet been heard of Mr. Peel.

A sharp frost had taken a grip of the country, such a frost as is rare in the west, and the prospect of skating occupied all energetic minds.

When Bab had finished breakfast she rose and went to the window,—the window was the next best thing to the open air, she had no hankering for cosy firesides. With critical weather-wisdom she scanned the country-side, the frost was black as frost could be. Jack Frost had hung no rime, no hoar-frost to beautify the ugly weather which was as unbecoming to the landscape as to the human race. East wind swayed the clumps of shrub and whistled through the bare woods ; on such a day most womenkind make for warm corners and stay in them.

‘It's too cold to drive,’ Bab said, ‘and the roads are in a shocking state, father, the hill's a sheet of ice beyond the village. I shall walk over to Tipton before lunch.’

‘Why to Tipton, Bab ? What on earth can you want there ?’

‘To begin with, I want exercise, and so do the dogs.’ Her eyes were sparkling, she was in such good humour on this bitter morning, it was so amiable of her to revel in such detestable weather, that her father's smile was most indulgent. ‘I sent my skates to be ground and, as the ponds will bear to-morrow, I may as well go and fetch them.’

‘What energy! Remember the wind’s clean in your face the whole way, your cheeks will be flayed alive.’

‘My cheeks are hardened, father, they won’t hurt, and the wind will be behind me coming home.’ Bab never grumbled at anything; perhaps this was small credit to one ‘in glowing health, with sufficient wealth,’ but it was a nice companionable quality of hers.

Mrs. Fenwick watched her daughter set out with the bounding dogs at her heels and tramp off down the drive, watched her holding up her face to feel the keen rush of the cold wind. She was a daughter of whom to be proud; how fast, how vigorously, how well she walked; the Scotch cloak was almost graceful as Bab wore it. Her even tread could be heard in the clear air, on, on, out of sight now.

With her heart in her eyes, Mrs. Fenwick watched, thinking, wondering, apprehensive. Dear Bab, her dear little girl, who but the other day was a bundle of flannel and nainsook, taking an airing, in her mother’s arms, upon the terrace.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, tall, straight, independent, she strode out into the world away from the nest.

‘To-day thou girdest up thy loins thyself,
And goest where thou wouldst; presently,
“Others shall gird thee,” said the Lord, “to go
Where thou wouldst not.”’

Those words Mrs. Fenwick had read long ago, she remembered them now she knew not why, and fell to brooding on the by-gone days. She thought of Bab, of Bab as a mere baby-thing, scouting her dolls, hating her nursery, clamouring for ‘out, out,’ as soon as she could speak. Of Bab toddling off after the browsing cattle, at work among the hay-makers, raking the hay with a tiny rake, deserting the flower-garden for the farm, begging her father not for the sweetmeats in his pocket, but to be taken to the horses in the stable. Of Bab later

cantering across the turf on the Exmoor pony, its shaggy mane flying and its rider's mane flying too as it took the ha-ha in its stride. Of Bab fishing for carp in the pond, watching her float for patient hours with Jack beside her. Of Bab in the school-room working well through her lessons, if only she was bribed with a ride through the woods as a reward. How often the mother had given leave for an extra hour in the fields, snatched from bed-time or school-room, for this out-of-door child of hers, because Bab came to her for so little, she asked so little of the care which is a joy to give. She seemed to have small need of a mother, she had no overwhelming sorrows to be comforted, no desires for petting. Over her childish illnesses she hardly asked for Mary. She had plenty of pluck. Measles, or mumps, or whooping-cough were quite endurable by aid of the dogs. She swallowed any remedy so long as the big stable-yard retriever was brought to the night-nursery to be witness of her heroism.

'Mary,' a well-known voice broke her train of thought, 'ah! there you are! I could not find you. Come here for a moment, I want you.'

Had it been because of that eternal 'want' and its owner? had it been because of her fathomless love for her husband, that their child had grown up so alone—so far-off?

With her boy-like indifference to fixed times for food, Bab came into the drawing-room at half-past two, threw her cloak and stick down on the sofa, declared 'she wasn't tired, but she had had enough, and would mother come and sit with her whilst she had lunch?'

Mother and daughter went off arm in arm to the dining-room, the former saying,

'My dear child, take off those heavy boots. What? You don't feel their weight? There can be no doubt, Bab, you should have been a man. You haven't got

over the days when you prayed twice every day, "God make me a good boy," and would pray nothing else.'

There was never a demonstrative affection between these two; but Mary's voice was very gentle and caressive.

'I saw Lady Young at the library; she's a funny woman.'

'She never amuses me.'

'It's such a high horse you ride, mother,' banteringly, 'when you ride to Woodbury.'

'Did you hear anything of Jack?'

'A great deal. Alethea is in London. Mother, do you think Jack likes Alethea?'

'I should suppose he has always liked her.'

'Alethea is fond of talking things inside out, so is he.'

'Lady Young's imagination is her only greatness.'

'A little more soup, please, mother. I hope the barometer is steady. Mr. Peel is down at the "Plough" again. I met him, too, in Tipton. He's coming out to skate to-morrow, and I have asked him to lunch.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

Winning should put any man into courage.

Cymbeline.

'One ploughs, another sows, who will reap no one knows.'

OBSTINATE as fate this December frost proved to be, lasting over Christmas and well on into January. The Fenwicks kept open house for the skaters; as the Combe ponds provided the only available ice for miles round, thither people flocked daily.

Bab began by being a keen, she ended by becoming an accomplished skater; she diligently set to cutting hieroglyphics, and achieved many dangerous gymnastics on skates.

As long as the frost lasted she was engrossed by her art and took small interest in her neighbours ; but all this time they watched and whispered about her, lifting or knitting their eyebrows, sometimes perplexed sometimes astonished.

It had been long settled in that part of the country that Miss Fenwick would eventually marry Mr. Holland, it was an understood thing, the match had been made in her cradle, and nobody, save perhaps the mother-in-law elect, took exception to the plan. The wedding seemed a natural and inevitable result to such a convenient friendship.

No wonder foreheads were wrinkled and tongues lowered.

‘Mr. Holland in Egypt, what could it mean?’

‘Mr. Peel at Tipton, there could be no sort of doubt what *he* meant.’

He flaunted his attentions to Bab boldly before every one: he was always at her elbow, and it was by no means a stationary position. If he did not actually put on and take off her skates, he saw that the abominable duty was performed.

He tutored her in wondrous evolutions, and caught her when she fell; he did everything which a devoted swain should do, and he did it openly day after day. Any attention he could spare from the daughter he gave to her people; he was awfully civil to Mary. She tried not to be frightened, but as time passed and the frost continued Mrs. Fenwick’s former hopes grew very faint and far off.

She did not meet Mr. Peel half-way, but he did not discover that he was in disfavour; he was not keensighted nor at all diffident. He was good-looking enough, but he was undersized and little people are masterful, making up in will what they lose in stature. He was not overburdened with intellect, though he was suffi

ciently sharp. If Bab did not mean to have him now, she was behaving vilely. But she was safe enough, Mrs. Dalrymple had assured him; he would go away for a day or two, and come back and have another shot. He liked her very much, quite enough to satisfy any reasonable woman's requirements.

For Christmas week Mr. Peel went down to Tregarvis; and while he was away game, and notes, and chocolates arrived daily for Miss Fenwick, who amazed her mother by the matter-of-fact way in which she received her presents, and by her extraordinary faculty for living in the present.

It was difficult, against the grain, for Mrs. Fenwick to put her natural reserve aside, and to speak of that which lay deep in her mind. But it was impossible to go on as they were doing; it was impossible, wrong, criminal not to warn Bab whither all these vine-leaves, and double eights, and outside edges must eventually land her.

Driven home by darkness, the daughter of the house had returned from the ice, and was lolling on a low chair near the lamp in the morning-room, playing a lazy game of 'snatching' with Fritz. Mrs. Fenwick stood in the shadow watching the pair; here was an opportunity for those few words which, though spoken in season, are, alas! the sort of words that are sadly and freely wasted on headstrong youth.

'What a long time this horrid frost lasts, Bab.'

'The glass is as steady as a rock. Stanhope Peel says we shall have another month of it. Really, I've learned everything he knows, there is nothing left to do.'

'Why did *Mister* Peel come back?'

Bab tried to see the speaker's face, but it was in shadow still.

'To *skate*, mother.'

'He could skate at Tregarvis. Bab, have you forgotten everything? Have you forgotten that letter?'

‘No, but he has.’

‘He hasn’t, he hasn’t; that is the one thing a man would never forget. If you have not changed your mind it isn’t fair that you should spend every day, and all day long with *Mister Peel*.’

‘I suppose you wish me to marry some one? He—he—he’s all right.’

When Bab saw her mother’s tragic face, she got up to her feet and said the most surprising thing of all.

‘I don’t believe in you, mother; you are far too cautious. If you had let us, Jack and me, tell every one about it, we should have been married by this time, and he would not be baking in Cairo, and losing all the skating.’

‘But, my darling——’

‘Don’t advise me,’ putting up her hand with a forbidding gesture, ‘I am afraid of you; last time you spoilt it all.’

‘Spoilt, Bab, you say spoilt? You are angry with me for sending Jack away—and yet—and yet, my dearest——’

‘I am not angry,—and when you call me “my dearest” I know something serious is in your mind. There will be plenty of time to talk about this expected crisis when it comes. It may be like Jack, and never come.’

‘Promise me, Bab, you will do nothing on the spur of the moment; you will wait.’

‘Wait, what for? Till Jack comes back? No, mother, I always thought it was all a fancy, and it is all a fancy. Dan,’ addressing her collie, ‘your mistress doesn’t say “good dog,” “good dog,” “good dog,” all day, and yet you’ve the sense to know she likes you. Some silly dogs, Dan, want such a lot of stroking.’

‘Do you think any man would be satisfied with such affection as you, Bab, give the dogs?’

'It's a good, lasting sort.' After a moment's thought, 'A little condescending, perhaps, and dictatorial.'

Misgivings and low spirits are, as a rule, extremely contagious maladies, but Bab did not catch them, her mental health was so sound and buoyant that a whole column of local tragedies could not infect her; her mother failed to impress her with her own fears and forebodings.

Of course the crisis came, and it came with the break-up of the frost, with cold drizzling rain, with all the relaxation of nerve consequent upon a thaw.

Whatever was, was right with Bab, she hailed the thaw complacently; 'it was beautiful rain, the ground would be as soft as butter in a day or two,' she said, turning her mind from the cutting of hieroglyphics to the stables and the hunting.

Only a duck could find the raw rain and the slushy surface of the ground enjoyable, but out Bab sallied to feed the waterfowl in their corner of the pond, and to visit all the animals within range.

Ankle-deep in the drenched grass Miss Fenwick stood, scattering her scraps amongst the bustling birds; the flapping of their wings, their splashing of the water drowned the sounds of approaching hoofs. Not until the black nozzle of a horse, and the outstretched hand of his rider, were within a foot of her, did she guess their vicinity.

She neither blushed, nor paled, nor trembled, nor did anything that it is orthodox for a startled woman to do.

'Oh, how de do?' she said; 'wait one moment;' and continued with dexterous aim to give the waterfowl plenty of exercise, as well as crust and biscuit.

'I really did expect to find you at home to-day,' he said. He was as sure of his answer now as he was of his own good looks, and of his tailor's excellence.

'It's such beastly weather you'll catch cold, you really will, I'm as hoarse as a crow myself.'

He cleared his throat. A Muscovy duck was bolting the last bit of bread, Miss Fenwick's hand was now available, she put it up and stroked the horse's sleek neck affectionately.

'Why did you ride over if you have a cold?'

'I came to see you.'

He got hold of her hand successfully; from the vantage height of the saddle he looked down upon her.

'I came because I've something to say to you. I know you are not the sort of girl not to be straight with a fellow. I know you wouldn't have let me worry about here all this time unless you meant business. After that letter, don't yer know? I like to be on the straight myself. If you can remember,' he could not remember one word himself, 'what I put down in black and white that time, I tell you, upon my soul, I meant it—not that I think you care about all that sort of thing—and I mean it still. Now I'll do my duty to you, Bab, if you'll make it square. We get along all right, don't we? Will you marry me?'

She was not going to jump at him even now, she released her hand and looked him straight in the face.

'Do you like me *just as I am*?'

'Rather.'

'You don't want me to change?'

'No, by Jove.'

'You know all there is to know about me, everybody does.'

'Just the sort of wife I want; no past, don't yer know, and no rot.'

'Do you understand that I am not at all clever?'

'Yes, yes,' reassuringly.

'I don't care for reading. I can't think, and discuss the why and wherefore of everything.'

‘Calling life names don’t improve it. And it is quite good enough for me.’

‘I’m not sentimental, not at all.’

He began to see what she meant ; it was quite gratifying, she was trying to set what she took for her deficiencies before him, and the deficiencies were but advantages after all.

‘Sentimental,’ he said. ‘Great Scott ! I should rather think you weren’t sentimental. Nobody is sentimental now-a-days.’

‘Yes, but they are ;’ she contradicted him shortly, with absolute decision. ‘It’s not obsolete, but if you don’t care about it, that’s all right.’

She was looking beyond him now through the driving mist at the house, and as she spoke began to move in that direction. He walked his horse alongside of her.

‘Before we get to Combe, I say, won’t you give me my answer ?’

‘When I said it was all right, I meant yes ;’ she walked at a smart pace ; ‘but it’s rather quick, and it’s so bitter cold down by the ponds. You had better hurry on to the house, you are sneezing again. Don’t dawdle here with me. Ride on.’

But he knew his duty better than to leave her now. Before they reached the porch, he found that Bab would only marry him if he particularly wished her to do so, and that she took the whole affair as coolly as the frigid weather.

‘Is your governor in ? I want to do everything on the straight, don’t yer know ; and I’ll go to him at once.’

‘He is in, but don’t tell him to-day.’

‘There’s no earthly reason to wait. I went to my lawyer at Christmas, and got hold of some particulars. I can satisfy him, don’t be afraid.’

‘I really think you had better wait till next week. He’ll be so surprised.’

‘Gammon! he must pretty well guess how the land lies. No chap would put up at the “Plough” all this time unless he was dead-serious. And didn’t he ever get to know about that letter?’

‘Yes, they all knew about it.’

This gratuitous frankness was annoying to a man whose vanity was out of all proportion to his liking. His was a masterful, or, rather, it was a determined and obstinate mind; he did not verbally ride rough-shod over his lady’s wishes, but he disregarded them, and went off straight to this momentous interview in the smoking-room.

Bab, Queen Bab, whose will had for more years than she could recollect been law for her boon comrade, was surprised at this line of conduct. She thought about it as she changed her wet things. It was so odd, so new that she should wish the bit of news to be kept quiet, and that, nevertheless, it should be blazoned abroad.

Before night all the household knew of it. As there was no adequate reason for declining this sleek, good-looking eldest son, with his presentable past, present, and future, he accordingly was accepted. His reception was not enthusiastic. Captain Fenwick stared and muttered, and hummed and hawed; Mrs. Fenwick said ‘Oh!’ three consecutive times, and said little else; but he was asked to stay on for luncheon in civil, if not in cordial, terms.

Luckily, there were no sensitive feelings to be considered, and civility, as long as he got his way, was every whit as acceptable as cordiality to Mr. Peel. He was, indeed, a bold lover; for when, on coming from his successful and lengthy interview with the authorities, he encountered Bab in the hall he kissed her, then and there, before her people; and a passing servant saw him do it, and tore off to spread the news in the back regions of Combe.

Bab found much more that was 'new' and 'odd' upon this first afternoon spent *tête-à-tête* with her betrothed ; it was so wet and dreary ; she had suggested going out, but he sneezed and cleared his throat, and thought 'it was too risky with such a cold as he had.' Her serenity was seldom ruffled, but there was nothing to do, and Mr. Peel's plans for mapping out his future career with her fitted into it, and Mr. Peel's caresses were so 'new,' so 'odd,' so unsettling a combination.

She had elected to be engaged and, of course, these kind of long afternoons were inevitable accessories to her election. But she had always declined 'planning' ; she had shunned receiving or bestowing any sort of caress. He smoked like a chimney all the time, this masculine occupation was forbidden her ; unless she was absolutely tired out, she always liked to be 'on the go.' It did not seem to matter at all what she liked.

About four o'clock she got him into the billiard-room, and things brightened then. Later he rode off, and left her to hurry out into the dusk after air and exercise, returning to find her father and mother sitting in the firelight, talking in monotone as though there was an outbreak of anthrax on the farm, or a revolution in the servants' hall.

These two forms of anxiety had, within Bab's recollection, visited Combe.

If the authorities were grievously disappointed they held their tongues about it, and were much as usual in their manner to Bab ; she saw they were subdued, she was a little subdued herself, she did not want to discuss anything or to look ahead, and they fell in with her mood.

That night, Becket, 'one vast substantial smile,' came into the green and white room. Though she shook her head and threw up her hands, yet she was overflowing with that unquenchable rejoicing over the prospect of a wedding which is an inherent weakness of our sex.

‘For slyness, miss, for slyness no fox could shame you. Fie, Miss Bab, leading me to think you were your mother over again. Dear, dear, the hours ’pon hours I’ve talked of poor Mr. Jack in this very spot. But, there, it is not the regular in-and-outs, the come-and-go old friends that carry off young ladies. Yes, indeed, you soon can see too much of a gentleman; the less you see the more you are apt to fancy. Oh, but I’m fond of Mr. Jack, and he was fond of you, dear; there, we all have our disappointments, and he’ll get over his, no doubt. I can vouch for it, for I’ve got over mine scores of times. Tregarvis is a fine, big place, Miss Bab, they tell me, and he’s a handsome gentleman, not so tall, but dapper as can be. Rides like a centre-piece, so Phil told Harris.’

‘We can talk about Mr. Peel for the rest of our lives,’ said the bride-elect, yawning and half smiling, ‘so we will give ourselves a rest now.’

Then old Becket threw her fat arms round her young lady’s long neck, and kissed her on both cheeks.

‘Bless you, my dear; you pretty thing I’ve carried in my arms, don’t hide your heart from Becket. God bless you! There, I’ll go, you want to think—not to talk; I know you *now*. Many and many’s the time your mother has sent me off, and sat up thinking and pondering till the candles have guttered down to their sockets, and when the morning came she would frown when I showed them to her. What a heart she had, and what a peaceable couple they’ve turned to, bless them! I can’t wish you no better than them.’

‘Good-night, Becket.’

At eight o’clock next morning the old servant herself brought the early cup of tea to Miss Fenwick, but the disappointing candles stood tall, prim, and forbidding on the dressing-table.

CHAPTER XIX.

I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace.

Taming of the Shrew.

‘A whip for a horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for a fool’s back.’

EVEN when Dr. Cupid throws his glamour along the path of plighted love the lovers find their route of dazzling sunshine is intersected with considerable tracks of shade.

But should Dr. Cupid have nothing to do with the case the path of a plighted pair is soon found to be steep, and honeycombed with pitfalls.

So much is expected from an engaged couple. In society they must appear demonstratively joyous, but then they must shun society; their exclusive aim must be to secure a *solitude à deux*, it is understood that they long to be together and alone.

They must submit to be treated with a smiling indulgence as though they were a pair of harmless lunatics. Mr. Peel and Miss Fenwick were conscious of absolute sanity, and the attitude of their neighbours towards them was half ludicrous and half irritating.

These superficial inconveniences were a part of Bab’s betrothal, but by no means the most serious part, and there were really quite serious consequences to this new state of affairs; at least, the consequences seemed serious enough to the bride-elect.

She had found out that she was not by any means so charming a person as she had thought herself, that she was not intended to be merely a centre-piece of the universe, that she had aggressive faults of temper, of will, of egotism, which had not been pointed out to her by the foolish prejudiced people amongst whom she had been reared.

She had found her master.

Wholesome, discipline maybe; but it is bitter, pungent; an unpalatable tonic; and it is apt to leave a bad taste in the mouth.

There had been no need, no blessed, saving need of yielding, of unselfishness in the Combe nursery. No small fry clamouring for their games, for their share of its little lady's good things.

Bab had not cared over-much for other children, her animals had been her chosen comrades. The nursery cat, the harmless necessary cat, lugged upside down in any Anglo-Saxon attitude whither its despot would . . . The noble-minded dogs submitting to small tortures as their dear mistress's odd form of taking her pleasure. The birds singing in prison and tweating gratitude for very small mercies.

She had queened it amongst these dumb playfellows. Why not? The law makes the crime, and dumb things have no protecting laws, unfortunately for them.

Without, Bab fell in readily with Nature's moods. The wind's will is the boy's will, and so it was with her. Her prime minister, Jack, when in office, had been guardian, protector, courtier, and had rarely collided with inclinations over which he had been only too fond and foolish.

By her surroundings, by fate, she had—alack that it was so!—been spoilt; and as she had been shown her faults frankly, she well and readily believed in them. She did not spar or wrangle with Stanhope Peel; not being a reasoning, observant, or reflective young person she hardly knew what had happened to change the complexion of life. She did not understand it was possible that her betrothed's affectionate solicitude for himself was in fault, and that if her surroundings, if her fate had spoilt her, he, too, had been equally spoilt, but by himself.

When two spoilt children elect to play together the

result is obvious, the weaker goes to the wall ; with wonder and a sore sense of injustice done, the weaker child is driven to the lowest place, and if he will play at all, must play second fiddle. But Bab did not tussle for mastery : she was not purposely obstinate nor despotic : she was possessed of that sort of faculty for unquestioning acceptance of the circumstances of life which makes the best of ' things ' when ' things ' are bad.

Once or twice, far back in the past, she had had qualms of uneasy fear that Jack, should she marry him, would want her to change, to be other than she was : she had had a vague idea that she did not understand Jack. But with this gentleman there was no such fear ; he would not trouble himself over-much about her mental and moral endowments. And so long as a man could ride straight to hounds, and shoot, and dance, and fly-fish, and skate, and talk small-talk fluently, and so long as he had a good tailor, he was all a man need be ; she never cast a thought to his character, his qualities. She knew little of the value of these latter *et ceteras*, and was slow in learning more.

Unluckily, upon close and daily intercourse accomplishments and nice features have small effect ; it is not the outside of the platter that supplies the necessary food for successful life.

There was no harm in Mr. Peel, none at all ; there was indeed very little of anything in him except a mighty strong will. ' He had his ways,' he said, and he expected his companions to fall in with them ; it never seemed to strike him that there could be two opinions about anything. Bab had had ' her ways,' but had never thought them original or peculiar, until she found them snapping, and cracking, and giving way around her everywhere.

He made plans, and with them Bab fell in ; she could not argue (but he could) ; she was eager, quick in her

methods, as early for every start as he was late, as vigorous and keen as he was lazy and indolent.

Rather than dispute any subject, she would give way ; it seemed as though she, who could not be led, might yet be driven.

So it came to pass that she would find herself at Hembury when she had hoped to golf at Burton ; or she would be cantering Scamp on the hill-top when she had meant to be trotting on Tiger in the valley ; or she would be playing piquet in the smoking-room, too sleepy to hold up her head ; or she would be calling at Woodbury when she had intended to be on Combe terrace with her dogs. Or she would be shooting when she had purposed hunting, and *vice versa*.

She was thwarted at every corner and turn of the day, and grew somewhat subdued under such novel treatment.

Though loving comes 'easy as lying' to most women, yet Mr. Peel was not easy to love ; he had none, or rather he had but little of what the female sex calls 'niceness' about him.

He had not outgrown a weakness for his clothes, though he was full old for it ; and he had reached the age for a mighty interest in his food, though he was full young for it.

This absorbing interest in his meals and his obstinacy were his only large attributes, and he was proud of both interest and obstinacy.

The neighbourhood received the news of the engagement much in the same way as Becket had received it : as long as the spectacle was likely to be pleasing, it really did not matter to any outsider to whom was allotted the most subordinate part of the ceremony. As long as there was to be a bridegroom, it could not concern any one but the bride who he was.

But Lady Young and her step-daughter joined hands and tongues for once in unison, picked Mr. Peel into the

smallest of pieces, and trod him underfoot before their friends. And when they met the bride-elect they did not congratulate her. She did not care a jot for Lady Young's coldness, but she drew Alethea aside.

'Won't you say something nice to me, Alethea? You know I am going to be married.'

'I have nothing nice to say. I have never spoken to Mr. Peel, so I have no opportunity of judging how much or how little you are to be congratulated.'

So this was Alethea's attitude; it was wrath, not forgetfulness which had closed her lips. Bab thought in silence for a moment, then she made an abortive effort to set herself right in these pale, disparaging eyes.

'It was not my fault about Jack, Ally; he would go away, he insisted upon going. It was his doing.'

"Those spendthrifts who their acres lose,
Blame not their folly, but the Jews."

'I don't know what you mean. I was not blaming any one; it is fate, this sort of thing, *fate*; I can hardly believe it myself sometimes.'

'Fate is a word only fit for shiftless, unprincipled people to cover their failure with; I don't think some women ever exert themselves to fully believe anything.'

Bab stared, and Alethea walked away from her with her nose in the air. From that day to this—and the Combe news had grown to be a stale tale of two months' standing—Miss Fenwick and Miss Young had 'walked no more as friends.' They got out of each other's way when they could do so, and if this was not feasible, they were civil on the surface of things, ignoring the immediate future which was of paramount interest to both of them.

Mr. Peel, meantime, was getting through a trying period of a man's life fairly well; Bab let him off pretty easy, on the whole, he was not dragged about at her

chariot-wheels at all. His quarters at Combe were, as he had anticipated they would be, comfortable; he got on with the old people, and he liked the place. His people patted him on the back, and opened their arms to Miss Fenwick, figuratively, by pen and ink; they had not been able, hitherto, to welcome the bride-elect at Tregarvis, but as soon as March came, and the last case of influenza was well over, she was to proceed thither to be overhauled and sampled.

The settlement path was smooth; in fact, Mr. Peel was quite satisfied with his bargain. Of course, if a man marries an only child, he must expect to get the rough with the smooth of that position. Of course no fellow ought to expect perfection, and equally, of course, an only child must be a bit spoilt. Mr. Peel had begun as it was meet he should go on, a man whose will was not his wife's law was a pitiable spectacle. As a matter of principle, he firmly insisted upon his rights of government; if there seemed any chance of mutiny, a few sharp words would effect his purpose; he had seen the colour rush into Bab's cheeks on these occasions, he had seen her hasten to fulfil his pleasure, vanquished in a moment; she was amenable to reason.

As a sign of the times, Bab never drove her cart now-a-days. The box-seat was by every law, both human and divine, the seat of predominancy, of government, the man's seat.

'Nothing,' to Mr. Peel's mind, 'looked such bad form as to see a girl driving a fellow about as though he was a tame cat.'

Once or twice she had remonstrated, but it had done no good, he had said, magnificently,

'If you want me at all, you must take me as you can get me. I am not going to be tooled about the country as if I was on the sick-list.'

It had sounded too rude to say 'she really did not

much want him at all,' so he had taken the reins and his own way.

It is so good for a woman to be broken in, so improving, so wholesome; but then, alas! great love is never sufficiently clear-sighted to tame, to train, to break in its object. Love, in its weakness, is desperately afraid of hurting; and even objects to inflicting that curative sort of pain which is cruel only to be kind.

Bab had had views on successful matrimony, give and take easy views. But it takes two of a mind to strike a bargain on that practical system, and Stanhope Peel considered that he, as the lion, should have the lion's share of taking. Perhaps he was right, she seemed to have made a mess of her affairs; perhaps he knew best. A big dog may, generally, be bullied with impunity by a small one, supposing the latter does not go too far; and Bab was, by comparison with her lord, quite a big person.

But one afternoon Mr. Peel did overstep his privileges, and the lovers fell out, coming to an open disagreement, as they drove homewards elbow to elbow in the T-cart. They had been golfing at Burton. Bab was tired, she had been round the links just once too often, and the weather, late in February, was warm and enervating. Mr. Peel was a great talker; Bab was hearing all the glories of the rounds re-drove as she was wont to hear them. Her eyes were upon Pickles, the cob; she would have liked to feel the reins between her fingers. Pickles was nice to drive, so free in his paces, so strong, so sure-footed, though he had his faults like other people, possessing a temper of his own, and a mighty prejudice against a bicycle.

Brunette had an easy time when Mr. Peel was staying at Combe, for Bab knew better than to trust that skittish person to his guidance; he was a good whip, but he drove, as he did all things else, with a high hand, and

with no toleration for vagaries or ebullitions of uneducated feeling on the road.

That day, as bad luck would have it, when they neared the village of Combe and were descending the hill which led thither, a cyclist, pushing one of those machines (of the cob's aversion) before him, turned the slope of the lane and met the cart face to face.

Coming suddenly upon this modern invention which he distrusted, Pickles did not behave with courage. He reared, backed, bungled up against the hedge, and then bolted violently forward beneath the whip which did not reassure him, though it forced him on—on abreast with that horrid legless horse, the bogie which brave men rode unfrighted.

With her sporting proclivities Bab would not, naturally, be expected to have any 'hysterical sentimentalities' about the necessary sufferings of her animal dependants. She, who could hunt one unoffending quadruped to death, could own no justifiable reason for objecting to the just correction of its erring fellow. She, to whom the crack of a gun was pleasing, should not dare to wince at the mere swish of a thong as it cut a fine wale across Pickles' sleek side.

But we are not of the reasoning sex. One of the most prized advantages of our mental weakness is the permission 'to have no reason but a woman's reason.' We trade, considerably, upon it. Bab, justifiably or not, did object strenuously, boldly, actively to the sound of swish and thud.

'Push that thing of yours back into the hedge, man,' she cried, addressing the unoffending cyclist fiercely, 'don't you see that you are frightening the horse? Stop, Stanhope,' passionately, 'stop. Don't touch him. *I won't* have it.'

Hurriedly the cyclist lugged his wheel of torment into the ditch, but the other hearer straightened his well-cut

lips and tightened the grip of his hand ; again, again, and yet again the whip cut lightly through the air and left its mark on the glossy bay coat of the sinner, Pickles.

These stripes were the last struck by this special instrument of man's mastery ; for Miss Fenwick disgraced herself, she tore the whip from the firm hand of justice, snapped it violently in twain, and flung it down upon the road : and there it lay in two pieces to bear witness to her ignominy.

Temper is a large attribute, but it has a knack of making its possessor feel uncommonly small. Mr. Peel kept his feelings well in hand, but he looked as he felt, outraged and disgusted, and with much dignity he gave the reins to his choking neighbour.

Then she, knowing herself to be in the wrong, tried to excuse her shame, her cheeks as red with embarrassment as they had been white with anger.

‘Pickles was afraid, only afraid,—he was terrified of a bicycle. He wasn’t, indeed he wasn’t used to the whip,—she was so fond of Pickles. Stanhope had better go on driving ; she couldn’t change places now, they were so close to home.’

So Stanhope drove on. Very grand and totally in the right, it was no wonder that he felt it was advisable to improve the occasion, and to say some crushing things about viragos, and henpecking, and tempers generally.

Poor Pickles was not more nervous and ill at ease during the remainder of the journey than was his guilty partisan.

On reaching the house Mr. Peel had, as a vexed man has every right to have, ‘letters to write,’ and he went straight off to the smoking-room, leaving Bab standing, aimlessly, at the front door. While daylight lasted she liked to be out. As Stanhope disappeared she drew a long breath, half a sigh, half something even less

reassuring to her wondering ears, and then she went off to forage in the back premises for sugar and apples; for such consolation as she could carry with her to the stables.

She found Pickles, later, much as usual in his stall, eager to munch an apple while his visitor stroked his neck and his nose, gently patted his sides, and kissed him, softly, between his eyes.

‘Poor old Pickles,’ she murmured to him, and she pronounced that first adjective as though she, she of all people in this happy world, she with a golden spoon between her lips, had yet some dawning inkling of that wretched word’s significance.

If the cob’s feelings, as well as his coat, had been ruffled by discipline, the dainties betwixt his teeth smoothed out all tangles. Pickles was himself again, but his mistress had become she knew not what. Into what sort of untoward womanhood had she drifted?

She had told Stanhope she was penitent. Hitherto, had she apologized for an indiscretion, she had ever been met three parts of the way, she had been assured that an apology was a generous, a beautiful thing to make, which swallowed up offences the most heinous.

A strange, newly-developed faculty had lately afflicted the bride-elect, she had once or twice found herself to be doing nothing and yet to be fully occupied, she had found herself in thought.

Neither to plan her trousseau, nor to arrange a varied course of ordinary pleasures would break this latest unwelcome accomplishment.

Trains of thought, unsought, tyrannous as an evil dream, now and again ran, substantial in their weight, through her buoyant mind.

Here, with her firm hand laid gently on the cob’s soft nose, with Brunette whinnying to her mistress from a stall near by, with the fresh wind sweeping by the open

door, with the soft twilight creeping over the drowsy earth, here, in this favourite haunt of Bab's, a sudden suspicion, a dull fear of the future crept into her mind, turning her chill and cold.

She remembered the thong and the swish of the whips which work with a will, work night and day in London; the swish with its sequence of hasty, pained, uneven clatter of weary hoofs, she remembered it well and shivered.

There was light work, good corn, gentle handling for these dear beasts around her, but for those others, heavy labour, harsh usage, and then—rest.

A worm cut in two by the stable-spade, a dead mouse in the bucket, a lurch in the walk of the groom passing the door, such trivial shadows as these had crossed her path a hundred times, but she had never felt this hard suspicion of life, this need of courage, of pluck to face a big world of possibilities.

Bab had been shown the way she should go, she knew many truths by rote the wisdom of which might, presently, be learned practically. When things went wrong she did not hurl the blame at her Creator, but had a vague misgiving that the root of such evils as were lay with her.

She did not dream of wriggling out of her engagement, she had never faced a difficult situation, not because she shirked her responsibilities, but because she had had no difficulties to confront. She had left much that was good behind her on the road. She had no shadowy plans in her disturbed mind for the illegitimate recouping of those losses.

She shook all the cobwebs off her mind as she tramped through the high-lying beech-wood, walking up the steep hill behind Combe, with the fresh wind tearing by her across the dark country to the twilight sky. When the darkness drove her homewards, she loitered

on the terrace, loth to leave the companionable wind that had blown the cobwebs into tattered far-off clouds.

'Bab,' her father's voice startled her, he came off the turf by the cedars, and was standing at her side, 'Bab, I have been on the look-out for you. I drew the stables, and the garden, and the poultry-yard blank. What have you been doing? Not sulking, eh?'

She laughed, but guiltily—perhaps she had been *sulking*, she was not exactly sure in what sulking consisted, but it did not sound a comfortable thing to do.

'I have a crow to pluck with you, Bab. You seem to have an extravagant way of showing feeling. Where is my whip?'

It was too dusk to see her face, and she had turned it away.

'I will give you a new one, father.'

'So you have been mutinous, Bab, fighting Stanhope and ousting Jack. It won't do, Bab, it isn't like your mother's daughter to be heartless, thoughtless. Do you think men's hearts are like whips, that you can break them in two and throw them away, and get new ones when you go shopping? It won't do, Bab, I came out to blow you up, Peel won't stand any nonsense. You can't take your own way in everything now-a-days. Fact is we have spoilt you, you've had your head all along the road. You are *spoilt*.'

Here were her cobwebs, repaired, condensed, put into these words. They sank deep into the recently furrowed soil of her mind, never had a home-truth been thrust deeper.

'You are spoilt,' that was it. For two-and-twenty years she had been spoiled. It was an accomplished fact, her father himself said so. Spoilt meant damaged, ruined, useless; horrid signification.

The next moment her accuser was kissing her and patting her hands in his, very angry with himself, very

tender with her because his foolish heart was wrung, for he heard how her voice broke, though she answered with a laugh—

‘Spoilt? That is very bad, father, and I never guessed it till lately. I—I hardly know how to unspoil myself now, it’s so late in the day.’

‘Peel will show you the way,’ dragging her hand through his arm. ‘He will show you the way, never fear. Matrimony isn’t quite such an easy thing as you fancy, Bab, you won’t get all your own way as you have had at home. There, don’t take fright; you ask your mother how to tame a husband, she knows how it’s done. It’s all a trick, but violence won’t do it; never show temper. Come along in and make it all up, I can’t bear to think you have got into hot water.’

Next morning Becket made a discovery which she summoned Rawle to witness: there stood two stumps of candle-ends upon Miss Fenwick’s dressing-table—two stumps that had been tall wax giants but ten hours ago.

‘’Tis a sure sign,’ said the old woman. ‘Miss Bab’s found her master this time. Let out her fire and burnt out her lights. It’s the same thing, and over-night she’s done both of it. Dear young lady, I always told you so. No feeling? She’s as feeling as a tooth.’

‘A tooth hasn’t no sort of feeling while it’s sound.’

‘Soon as it softens, there is nothing feels like a tooth,’ sticking to her ugly symbol.

‘But then it feels nothing but pain.’

‘All feeling is pain. What a woman you are to argue. Do you think it’s pleasure as keeps a lady up staring at nothing and letting out her fire, and mooning till dawn? All feeling is pain, and when you’ve come to my age you’ll know it.’

CHAPTER XX.

The good are better made by ill,
As odours crushed are sweeter still.—ROGERS.

‘The last shuts the door.’

‘WE used to fish pool and pool.’

‘Whom do you mean by *we*?’

‘Jack and I.’

‘Odd chap, Holland. Pretty rotten way that of catching fish. I spoil your sport, and you spoil mine; but I suppose we must pretend to like it—throws us together, eh, Bab? Everything and every one throws us together. Holland used to fish pool and pool with you, did he? But then Holland wasn’t keen.’

‘He got a pound fish last time we were out; you’ll be lucky if you do it in our stream. Jack wasn’t particularly keen, but he was good enough.’

Mr. Peel was standing in the hall, engaged in getting his rod and fishing gear into portable order. Bab awaited him, as she had already done for ten impatient minutes, at the door of the porch.

‘Make haste, Stanhope.’

‘My dear child, we’ve got the whole blessed day before us. You are always in such a flurry to be off.’

She opened the porch door and looked out; then she whistled a long, shrill, ear-tormenting summons to the dogs.

‘Come, dogs,’ whew-whew-whew. ‘Dan, Dan, hie on, old man, we are going to the river.’

Then Mr. Peel left the manipulation of his tackle, and went out into the porch.

‘Bab,’ he said, ‘I draw the line at the dogs, they can’t come; upon my soul, I can’t have them worrying about. They never do one mortal thing *I* tell them. They’ll get off to the coverts, or they’ll hang about in

the way, or they'll want a swim. I know those dogs of yours, they're a beastly nuisance.'

Her eyes were cast upon the 'beastly nuisance' at her feet, her mouth was serious and drooping.

'If we are to fish, dearest, let us fish. If you've set your mind on having the dogs, I'll put your basket and tackle back in the hall, and we'll take 'em a walk. Of course I will do what you like, but I ain't going to try the two things at once.'

'We always used to take Dan, Stanhope; he keeps to heel the whole time. Really and truly he's never any bother.'

Mr. Peel did not answer this interrogatory piece of intelligence, but he shrugged his broad shoulders and bit the corner of his fierce moustache. Dan was an elderly dog, too elderly to win fresh hearts, though dear to those who had learned in his youth to appreciate him: long-grown affections will bear a strain. The dog's rough coat, faded eyes, his deafness, and his veteran bearing appealed to his mistress's compassion; in reason they could merely irritate an indifferent acquaintance.

'Can't we take Dan, Stanhope?'

'He'll be far better off by the fireside, Bab. He's so stiff he can hardly get along. A day by the water won't be any treat to him. He's getting a bit past larks, you can't make much but a door-mat of the old chap.'

She swallowed the door-mat allusion with a gulp, and, stooping, caught the collie gently by the collar.

'No, Dan, no, Fritz, none of you can come. All right, Stanhope; but I'll take them in and give them a biscuit or two, they are disappointed.'

While the biscuits were crunched piecemeal, Bab wondered whether these greedy dependants ever hungered for their freedom, or whether the whip had, plying from generation to generation, shaped them into the dear and

noble friends their masters loved ; whether discipline was as wholesome as it was galling ?

It was not a propitious morning on which to go a-fishing, but the betrothed pair, with their baskets slung on their shoulders and rods in hand, went out and faced the sharp wind which blew from the north-east. Thin, tattered white clouds drove across the vividly blue sky, the sun was hot, the atmosphere clear to excess so that the colours were intensified, till the chimneys of the lodge looked red, like scarlet, and the dull slates of the roof heliotrope. The shadows were black and clearly defined.

Basten came out of the lodge as they passed, and gave the lovers greeting.

'Agwaine feeshin' be 'ee, thin, miss ? Thir bant overmuch water, I'm aveard, zur. Us 'ants rain, us dü. Ess, 'tez a warm zin, but a cawl win'. Thir's rough wither commen, rough wither, zure ; I've a-rade et pun Moore's almanac. Winter bant over, niver vear.'

'Down in the west the weather forecasts are all from Jeremiah,' said Bab to her betrothed. 'Basten always cries wolf. East is the one dry quarter. Basten, you've no right to prophesy evil to-day.'

'Yü bide a bit, miss, and yü zee how et'll be.'

Basten went back into his house, called to his wife, and pointed with his thumb at the departing figures of man and maid.

'Dü 'ee think, missus, 'er'll take thet thir füty, itimy little gintleman ? Dü 'ee think 'er'll take 'un in church stid o' t'other ?'

'Ess, tü be zure. Th' wedden's tü Aisetur, an' 'er's agwaine visettin' tü 'es place next wik. I dü sim 'tez a pity 'er cudden take Muster Jack, us be usen tü 'ee. But 'ee stüd tü hard vur she, 'er's nothin vur scholars, I'm tawld.'

'I'd rayther zee Muster Jack long ov she, missus. He were terrabul zot on Miss Bab, 'ee were.'

'Bless 'un, thin, why diddenee bide 'ere, and not lave 'er? He habben zaid nought, zo far es I kin 'ear.'

'Tez them ballowin' cows as allers vurgets thir calves the vurst, missus. Muster Jack ant a ballowin' zort.'

'Ee shud 'ave 'ad a bit ov patience thin, 'er'd hav' got üsed tüen. Yü kin üsen yerzel tü eny man, scholard aw naw.'

'Thir's rough wither commen, yü mark my wurd,' and he went out into the sunshine.

Basten had no right to be discontented with the day, whatever the fishermen chose to be.

Bab's spirits rose, she was gay and genial on the road, she did not object to the wind, or to the blustering, dry, dusty month of well-hated March. Upon this eventful year the month of February had been memorably warm, genial, pleasant, deceiving the west-country folk into a belief that winter was over.

The season, consequently, was an early one, song thrush and blackbird, lark and chaffinch sang all round the country-side, the buds were fat upon the trees, the snowdrops already over, and the daffodils showing colour in their oblong calyx.

Mr. Moore might prophesy evil and the country-people might groan, but they did these lamentations every year, it was not likely that anybody at all would believe in them.

Across the meadows, away to the banks of the trout stream that brawled, and smiled, and slumbered, and growled, and fought its way through the wide vale to the sea, Bab piloted her lover. He had not fished this water hitherto, it was new to him, and Bab did the honours of her river very graciously.

Civilly she indicated the best pools, the most well-stocked and likely reaches of the stream; he was

intelligent enough to make the best of her information, and was soon thirty yards ahead of his lady-love, whipping an excellent stretch of water; out of humour with nothing save the weather.

Waiting, where bushes fringed the rotten bank and the river ran like oil, his hostess, intent as usual on making the best of things, though somewhat sobered by the queerness of her novel circumstances, overhauled her cast and practised the saving art of patience.

The slopes of the meadow, the winding of the stream, the hedgerows and the distant hills were familiar, too familiar to strike her eyes, but the auspices of her craft were fresh, so distinctly fresh as to catch her attention.

She had found out that she must have been a grasping, greedy, overbearing person in the past, or why should the hindermost place be distasteful to her? Or why should she not take kindly to playing second fiddle, which had to be played by some one after all?

Heigho! Mr. Peel was out of sight now, so she walked on past the awkward withies and the oily water, and set to fishing in a merry, rippling turn of stream. Casting a long, straight line across the shady pool beneath the opposite bank, her fly—a blue upright, a delicious morsel such as a Devon trout epicure much relishes—fell softly on the water.

A fisher's imagination is often as lively as his prey. When Bab felt a tug at her line, when she felt some lusty fellow dash off with his luncheon (as well as his heart) in his mouth, she cried out that,

'She had hooked a big fish, a pound fish!'

At any rate, he was a fish with a taste for freedom and a will of his own.

He wanted a deal of playing, and as she exercised her art, in vain and boastful mood she called for 'Stanhope, Stanhope,' eager for those congratulations which had

always been one of the best parts of her successes in the days of long ago.

The wind was with her voice, it carried well and reached the young man, who, when he heard the summons, said something natural, but hasty, between his teeth, and set his rod down on the ground.

‘A—cow,—or she has caught her cast.’

He swung along up the bank at a good round pace, for the ringing call abruptly ceased, and there followed a silence such as shook his nerves.

However, when he reached Miss Fenwick’s side and found no tragedy at all, no cow, no entanglement, nothing but a meagre trout flopping about in the grass, he cried, ‘Is that *all*?’ and laughed at his betrothed.

And ‘that’ was all, she faltered, explaining how far bigger is a fish on the hook than a fish in the hand, till he burst out laughing again, and patted her shoulder and chaffed her, too amused to be angry.

Bab shrunk morally to the size of her prey; she had behaved witlessly, inconsiderately, and was ashamed of herself, she allowed it, murmuring apologies.

‘Will you kill the trout before you go back, Stanhope? If you don’t mind, just stop it moving, Jack always does.’

He did as she desired and, with a caution, left her to herself.

‘I’ll fish on to the hut and wait for you there,’ he said. ‘Lunch ought to be down by that time. I will see your basket then. Ha, ha, ha! I say, my dear, don’t lose your head again unless you hook a whale or an otter.’

He hurried off and left her to her craft. It was a craft of which she had, in the past, spoken in eulogy. Now she fished till her arm ached and no fish rose.

Patiently she re-fished the stream, growing apathetic, careless as time passed, till presently, catching her line

in a thicket, she freed the rod at the loss of her cast. Then she sat down on the turf, setting to work to make up a new one, such as must lure a troutling to his death.

Thoughtfully she turned the leaves of her fly-book, selecting her flies slowly. Fishing was—it was an—occupation—merely an occupation, nothing more.

All sorts and kinds of amusements had turned to occupations.

Alas for the metamorphosis that transforms amusement to occupation, entertainment to pastime, when time is found to be a tyrant not a treasure, when he has to be slaughtered not lengthened out and used voraciously.

But the fisherwoman had no fault to find with time. If the sport fell flat, the fault must lie with her. The stream was as usual, the meadows had not changed, the recently-fished water sparkled like ice in the sun, and rippled and rushed on its musical course.

The *recently-fished* water,—she had no business to harp on the circumstances of her position, some one must take the back-seat by rivers, coverts, in carts alike.

There was no earthly reason why she, she, she should expect to be allotted the best of things by land and river. She had been spoilt, barbarously spoilt by—every one.

‘While it lasts,’ she smiled a plucky little smile, ‘it is nice and seems natural.’

The wind was gusty, when she had fashioned her cast and was rising to her feet, it blew sharply, puffing the line out of her careless hold and driving it up about her face and head. She caught at it roughly as it went, and dragged it back; as she did so she felt a sharp prick, nay, more, a stab in the nape of the neck.

Indeed, it was a miserable day for fishing, and she had hooked herself; a March brown was buried in her

flesh, a most uncomfortable and tenacious visitor. She pulled off her gloves and tried her best to extricate the barb, but it remained deeply embedded, hurting her when she touched it, but not budging from its tenement.

The wind flecked the other flies unpleasantly near her face; she cut the line with her knife, reeled it up, unhitched the joints of her rod; that March brown must be got out,—and Bab was certain that Stanhope would dislike the task as much as he disliked an interruption; angling to him was a serious profession, and a companion an impediment. A clumsy exacting young woman had better spare him unnecessary worry, she would leave the gentleman undisturbed and she would go to Dr. Bedford, straight to Dr. Bedford. The hook was in, it must be cut out. Compassion will not do the work of the knife.

With the broken knees, with the bumps and bruises of childhood what bindings up there had been in the foolish past! She smiled to think of it as she turned away from the stream, smiled—and yet—and yet was she sick for the worthless compassion, for the sympathy which helps a hook out of flesh as it helps a flounderer through the difficult ford of life?

Nay, but she was sick because of her clumsiness, and because she had to face the consequences of that clumsiness, sick with apprehension; but, withal, a little complacent at her own line of conduct, which was as new as it was commendable.

Off by herself with her ills, she took a short cut through a lane to the village; being a little over-full of herself, she forgot that she had missed the servant with the luncheon basket for whom she had had directions, forgot all about the importance of food, forgot every one save her doctor, her hook, and herself.

‘Dr. Bedford was not at home,’ his servant said, ‘but he would be in directly, she was sure of it.’

‘What sort of directly?’ knowing how the length of

a doctor's directly varies, and guessing at the diplomatic necessity of the maid. 'Does directly mean a minute or an hour? Well, never mind, I must wait, however long he may be.'

As she was shown through the hall, a poor woman sitting there, with a small child on her knee, rose and curtsied as she passed. Bab nodded an absent good-day, her collar was rubbing the adhesive March brown, and the hurt smarted.

The verb to wait had been conjugated at Combe of late, and Bab would have waited in patience had not the child in the hall without set up a tiresome, wailing cry, a cry intermingled with a cough. She bore the noise for some time without remonstrance; at length she could bear it no longer, but went out into the lobby and accosted the mother.

'What's the child crying about? Oh, it's you, Mrs. Peek, how do you do? Come in here by the fire, the boy is coughing. Are you, too, waiting for the doctor?'

It filled the time, it deadened the pricking of her captor, it presently interested Bab to hear the woman's story. She had the west-country gift of the gab, the unpremeditated flow of words which lacks neither humour nor pathos. The wondrous way of talking where the truth seems the only thing to say (though it may not show the speaker at her best), so that the 'beauties' and the 'uglies' of humanity get mixed up close in the story.

Bab heard the story of the child's illness, all the cause and effect of the sickness, all the details of the suffering and the tending; it was a grim recital.

'I spares 'un nothin', miss, I tell 'ee that. I denies myzel' es naw one naws. 'Er can't ayte, but 'un drinks quarts ov mulk, an' a gud drap ov bafe-tay yur mother zinds. Lukee zee 'ow müty and fainty-like 'un be. I've cüm atter an ordur vur port-wine the doctur promised, I cudden let 'un bide wi'out et.'

The woman was naturally as independent as Miss Fenwick herself, but independence is a luxury which the poor mother of a sick child cannot afford. Her face brightened when she saw Bab's hand in her pocket, where she, with her odd masculine propensities, carried a supply of loose and chinking gold and silver.

'It is very sad,' said Miss Fenwick, slowly, looking at the boy's wizen little face. 'Don't say all that, Mrs. Peek, don't thank me, it is nothing.'

Now a feel in a well-filled pocket is not an action for which any one need bestow lively gratitude. Did not such gratitude spoil people? There was nothing 'filthy in lucre,' look at the woman's face and see. Might not the filthiness about lucre lie with its possessor, soiled by unnecessary gratitude, spoiled by thanks for that which cost her nothing?

She would, she would indeed, she would do more than dip her hand into her pocket, she would try to think, Miss Fenwick would tax her memory.

Then Dr. Bedford came into the room, and up Bab's hand involuntarily went to her neck, where the smarting and pricking increased as she did so.

Dr. Bedford took the March brown from her flesh much as he would have performed that operation for a fish, he neither cut nor sliced, but he hurt her considerably; she set her teeth and held her tongue, and when it was all over, and the fly had frizzled in the fire, she went home.

She found Combe vacant, no one was there to listen to her tale of woe, so she had ample time to perfect her new faculty for thought, while she sat curled up in a corner of the drawing-sofa, with no one but the dogs beside her.

Of course every one would be extremely concerned when they heard of what had happened to the daughter of the house; and she rather fancied that she had

behaved heroically, for she had worried nobody, she had borne her pangs alone. Her people would be wrung to the heart by the sight of the little plastered scar above her collar.

However, it was a season of surprises, times had changed; no one came to her except Stanhope Peel, and he came indignantly, as a man who has had neither sport nor lunch has a right to come.

'Here you are then, I've been looking for you for an hour.'

'I have been at home for a long while.'

'Upon my soul, Bab, I don't understand it. If you did get sick of whipping that rotten stream, why didn't you let me know? I waited in the hut, as hungry as a hunter; why on earth did you send lunch back? If *you* didn't want to stay out, *I* was there.'

'I didn't meet James,' she explained, much startled. 'You see, I went back through the lane; I forgot all about lunch. I can't think why he didn't take it down. I am so sorry; ring the bell, Stanhope,' she rang it herself, 'and I will ask what it means.'

It meant that the man, having heard that Miss Fenwick had been seen with rod and basket on her homeward way, drew a lazy conclusion, from the state of the weather and the look of the sky, that fishing had been abandoned, and that he might return whence he came.

'Go and scold James, Stanhope,' said Bab; 'it will be a relief to you, and then Barnes will get you some food.'

'Lunch—now? How like a woman,' he growled. 'Spoil my dinner at this hour?'

'Then have a glass of claret and a sandwich. I,' and there was an emphasis on that important pronoun, 'shouldn't mind spoiling your dinner; I should eat when I'm hungry.'

'Oh, you, you,' he said, by no means graciously, as

he left the room, 'you can be trusted to take very good care of yourself.'

Later on in the dusk, soothed, perhaps, by sandwiches and claret, at any rate in chastened humour and softened mood, the half-starved gentleman came back with a flag of truce to his betrothed, and found the blemish on her fair throat, and found also some traces of repentance about her lashes, and thought that, on the whole, he might have been more forbearing in word and deed.

'Hooked yourself, Bab? Then why didn't you holloa for me? I wish you had, you shouldn't have gone off alone to the doctor.'

'I hadn't caught a whale or an otter, I thought I was forbidden to holloa.'

Nice girl, she had taken him seriously, sensibly; she was a good sort, he was pleased with his bargain, and, frankly, he told her the flattering fact. Then he kissed her a great many times as an easy, inexpensive method of consolation.

'I am awfully sorry I cut up rough, but no chap's temper will stand starvation, don't you know.'

CHAPTER XXI.

'Oh, wasteful woman, she who may
On her sweet self set her own price,
Knowing he cannot choose but pay—
How has she cheapened Paradise!
How given for nought her priceless gift,
How spoiled the bread and spilled the wine
Which spent with due respective thrift
Had made brutes men, and men divine.'

'A friend is not known until he is lost.'

SINCE the unlucky catch by the trout-stream a week had passed, a busy bustling week, for the approaching wedding filled time and mind alike at Combe. Upon

the following day the bride-elect was to pay her long-deferred visit to Tregarvis : as yet she had seen none of these new relations-in-the-law, and she somewhat grudged the ten long days which it would take them to overhaul her.

It had been arranged that Bab should travel westwards alone so far as a certain junction which bordered the sister county, and that there her betrothed should meet her, travelling down for the purpose from Dorsetshire, where he was making the most of a few last days hunting, and personally conduct her to his Cornish home.

Mrs. Fenwick's writing-table was littered with lists, patterns, estimates, and Mrs. Fenwick sat with an elbow set amongst the chaos of paper, and her head on her hand. Godfray had gone to London on nuptial business, the anxieties of the trousseau seemed to weigh heavily on his wife. Bab decided nothing, she agreed with every suggestion made, and said 'all right' universally. She was really less interested than the weed-boy in the garden in the wedding function.

'Mother,' Bab had come unexpectedly into the morning-room, and found the dejected inmate in a tell-tale attitude. 'What's the matter? What are all those letters about? Can't they match the lace? Never mind, get anything, it won't show. There,' and she took up one of her mother's letters, 'there,' smiling, 'that is from Jack. May I read it?'

'I think,' Mrs. Fenwick put out her hand for her possession, 'I think that letter was only intended for the person to whom it is directed—for me, Bab.'

'He has not written once to me since—those congratulations.'

The congratulations had been kind but short; there had been nothing more than the usual benediction, nothing fervent, nothing frosty.

'Jack writes very often to me.'

‘Is there anything wrong?’

‘Yes, at least it seems very wrong to me. Jack is going to India.’

‘To India? why to India? Isn’t Egypt far enough?’

‘He wrote about it, asking me for my opinion, a month ago, but he hasn’t taken my advice. He is going to practise at the Indian bar, there is more opening, an earlier chance for him there, he says. He has done it all in such a hurry; it is a serious thing to decide on in a month. If he would only wait a little.’

‘Jack,’ slowly, thoughtfully, ‘always does everything in a hurry. He is—contradictory.’

‘He is impulsive by nature, cautious by—art.’

‘Let me read—yes, *do* let me read his letter?’

‘No, no.’

‘Write to him, mother, here, now, there’s the paper. Tell him he must not go, tell him you won’t let him go, tell him that no one ever swears anything but perjury in India. That will make him think, and that will stop him. Tell him that.’

How had Bab found out this? what new light had come to show her reason for the use of such arguments?

‘It is too late; he sails this very week. He went down to Woodbury last night, he is coming here this afternoon to say good-bye.’

A long silence followed. Mrs. Fenwick still sat with her head on her hand, her eyes down-cast; her daughter stood before her motionless as a rock. The noisy birds outside broke the stillness with their songs. It seemed to the elder woman as if the silence was alive with a quick fear, a dread which set her heart beating fast. She held her breath and trembled most unnecessarily. Nothing came of the silence; there was nothing about which to excite herself. When at length the girl spoke, she did so with the utmost calmness.

‘Then I shan’t see him, mother,’ she said. ‘Stanhope

has written to ask for his clubs ; I broke his putter at Burton, so I must take it to Tipton, and get it set to rights and send it off. He wants it at once.'

'Could you not hurry back, Bab ? To be out seems so—so indifferent.'

'To be in would seem more—indifferent, mother.'

Mrs. Fenwick sighed.

'You must do as you like, Bab.'

'No,' rapidly, 'no. Just for once not as I like, but what is best.'

'You may be sure that Jack won't say, or look anything uncomfortable,' bracingly. 'You are out of reach now ; he is not the sort of man who would cry for the moon. Not one man in ten thousand marries his first love. They get over their little and they get over their great disappointments : you need not be in the least afraid of a scene.'

As Bab walked to the door, she changed colour : was friendship valueless to men, so that they were ready to throw it away ? Must they have all, or nothing ?

'I go to Tipton at once, mother, and get back in time to see him.'

Early in the afternoon Jack Holland came tramping up the drive as though no shot had ever peppered and irritated his knee-cap, as though no associations save ordinary, neighbourly ones lay around and within the grey house, his destination.

The eternity through which he had passed since last he saw those sepia waterfowl floating on that sapphire water had left no visible mark upon him. He was bronzed by Egyptian suns ; he was flushed with expectation. All his vigour was alert to keep his mind, his manner, his eyes, his voice, his words in satisfactory order, in decent trim.

He was in his sane mind, but it was a trial to visit the haunt of his former insanity. To pull up the roots

—the long-grown, wide-spread roots—of association with the only home he had known, was such a wrench as set him bleeding within. But it was a wrench that he meant to get over quickly, to get away from, to have done with, and to forget. He was a voluntary exile, banished by fate; a little pluck was what was wanted. Good-byes, and eternal ones, were going on from pole to pole, and yet the world was not wailing aggressively.

Dear old Combe! He had planted that thorny, blossomless rose-tree which clambered up the stone-work by the porch. It was high above his head now, he could not reach it; so much was out of reach: the seeds which he had sown had withered in the ground. He—he must, in his guise of caller, ring the bell. A white poodle, a stranger, came with friendly Thomas to the door, growling officiously at the visitor's gaiters, and following Jack to the drawing-room whither he was shown. There he found Mrs. Fenwick, no one but her; flushed, expectant, with outstretched hands she went to greet him; Jack's manner nipped any gush, any demonstration on her part, like a blight.

She could be checked easily: she, who ever found it difficult to drag her feelings to the surface; she, who had no knack of baring her mind, or wearing her heart on her sleeve. She saw that Jack had come as a caller, and that he meant to act his part to the life. He talked as a caller. He did not allow the dialogue to drop or to languish. He asked after every one; he touched upon his travels, upon his prospects, upon the weather—a storm was prophesied, but a weather prophet was a false prophet.

He would not keep this sort of chat up long. Mary was waiting for the break which must come, she knew the impetuous, impulsive nature which underlay the caution better than he knew it himself, and she set her mind to patience; the farewell should be genuine at

the last. Civility between old friends at such a juncture was a farce with which to usher in the tragedy of parting.

She sat waiting with her eyes on his ; he did his part well so far,—but now his voice vibrated and broke suddenly, there was a sound of coming steps and voices, the door was opened and a brace of callers, a brace of genuine callers were shown into the room.

These unwelcome guests had come from a distance, and they stayed a weary while. Jack, in his weakness, was glad of their presence, and sat down to a repertoire of fluent dialogue at his colloquial best.

Presently, he rose to take his leave. She was out, it was where she had best remain.

‘Don’t go,’ said Mrs. Fenwick, ‘not yet, Jack, wait a little longer.’

Though no man ever loathed a duty more, yet it was so old a custom of his to try and please his hostess, both by will and deed, that Jack reseated himself.

‘Wait for tea,’ she urged ; then, addressing the trio generally, ‘My daughter was obliged to go into Tipton this afternoon, but she will hurry home to see Mr. Holland.’

To Mrs. Fenwick’s candid lips the simple truth came, though against her will. Diplomats deny that truth is wisdom, and in this case its effect was unfortunate.

‘As there is a chance of seeing Miss Fenwick, Amelia,’ said one lady to the other, ‘we really must stay on until she comes.’

‘Yes, mamma, I want to hear all about the wedding.’

Then the unlucky women began to talk of the wedding, of nothing but the wedding. They dragged forth from the unready lips of the bride-elect’s mother every arrangement, every detail concerning the event.

Jack knew now that Combe would be the Peels’ head-quarters, he knew that they would spend some months of each year in London ; he knew that the

bride's satin dress would be trimmed with Honiton lace, and that she would wear real orange-blossom. He knew of the frocks, of the names, of the number of the bridesmaids. He knew the route of the honeymoon and the colour of the go-away-gown.

He also knew the train by which Bab would set off for Tregarvis on the following morning.

Jack was sorry for Mrs. Fenwick, for she was reluctant with her facts and loth to look him in the face. He bore it all like a stoic, discussing Bab's wedding with as much interest as a dying peasant discusses a funeral—his funeral, the one luxury, the one festivity which surely shall be his.

When the daughter of the house came into the room she found visitors, tea-cups, small talk, no awkwardness at all.

Those who knew Bab well could read her mind at will, she assumed nothing, pretended nothing. She had hurried home to say good-bye to an old friend who was at variance with her, she met him with a serious, even a slightly constrained greeting.

How tall she was and fair! Her eyes were on a level with his own, her cordial hand was warm in his, but—she had changed. Yes, yes, her eyes had changed, her lips, her voice, her very attitude was different.

The hazel eyes had quickened, the dewy lips were less careless, her face spoke deeper things than it had done in his day, his—his day when he had failed, when he had lost, when his sun had sunk for good and all.

So Peel had brought about this alteration; this was precisely as it should be, but Jack found it execrably difficult to speak when Bab sat down beside him, watching him not with dissecting, disconcerting scrutiny, but with eyes such as might roam over a familiar sight

when seen from a new point of view, eyes that search for the old landmarks that are taking new forms when newly focussed.

Again the wedding topic burst upon the room, and Bab was drawn into it; she kept her eyes on Jack, but she talked obvious duty-talk to the womenkind.

The Queen Bab of yore had talked only when she had something which she wished to say, ignoring duty in conversation as elsewhere; and that sovereign whom Jack had served had possessed infinite assurance, no diffidence at all. How he hated change; she had suffered, he was sure of it; he saw it in her eyes; inevitable, natural pain from which he could not save her.

Presently, when the visitors had gone, Bab plunged into the subject which filled her mind. She hated his going to India, she opposed his plan, she thought he was altogether wrong, and, in the midst of her vehemence, broke off flatly, and said, 'perhaps he knew best, no doubt he knew best, of course he knew best.'

Jack flung away from the Eastern question, hating her humility, loathing this unknown submission, irrelevantly shifting the conversation.

'That's a good-looking poodle, Mrs. Fenwick,' he said—Bab loved the great bird and beast topic—'but he gives himself airs, he growled at me, he thought I'd no business at Combe.'

'He is a bad-tempered dog,' said Mary, quickly, 'he growls at every one, strangers are always officious.'

Bab laid her hand, with a suggestive hoop of beautiful pearls encircling her finger, on the dog's head. Jack got up, hurriedly, he understood to whom the brute belonged.

'He is very wise,' she said, 'he belongs to Stanhope, not to me. Marquis, will you do your tricks for this gentleman?' then for the second time she ended a

vigorous start tamely. 'No, Marquis, go and lie down, there is too great a sameness about tricks, Jack is sick of tricks.'

It was an odd leave-taking; Jack was standing up, it was all so abrupt, he was gone in a moment, no one said anything but just good-bye. There was no sign to show that his handshake was the final farewell to a long dream of youth, that the first page of life had been turned down and was over, over as the daylight would be over with the sinking sun.

'Good-bye, Bab,' he had said, 'I must get off now or I shall be late for dinner.'

Mrs. Fenwick had gone out with him, leaving Bab alone; presently they passed the window, they were talking to each other, and they walked slowly down the drive on out of her sight. 'He must go, or he would be late for dinner.'

Bab put her hand upon her side, there was a weight there, she drew a deep breath that hurt her, it was so hard to draw.

Did not people cry when they said good-bye? In the old days she had not cried when Jack had gone tramping down the drive, for then, then he would soon come back again. Lately she had missed him, she had wanted him, and 'he must go, or he would be late for dinner.' Because she was married, was that a reason to leave her? was she to have no friend but Stanhope? She was half-way across the hall,—she would run after Jack, she would say another good-bye, a real good-bye this time,—when her intention was, happily for those two people without, arrested by a servant, who came towards her with a telegram. Mr. Peel did most of his communication with her by telegram. She felt no qualm of apprehension as to what that missive might contain, but paid the portage, and then opened the envelope absently. The message was not alarming.

'Bring putter and Marquis. Come four train; will meet you at junction as arranged.—Peel.'

It 'was not much, but 'twas enough' to intercept her intention, her impulse to follow Jack was at an end. She went back into the drawing-room and wrote a couple of letters. The first to her mother-in-law-elect, saying that Stanhope had altered her train for the third time, and that her hour of arrival on the morrow would be late; the second letter which she wrote was full of minute directions about a certain dress for the trousseau, and was directed to her dressmaker.

She carried out her letters to the post-bag, dawdled for some minutes about the hall; nay, it was bleak and cold out of doors, she would not go out, not out to-night; so she returned to the drawing-room, and—took up a book,—that refuge of the destitute, a book.

How many hours of the living day had Jack been wont to waste with his head in a book! Why had he read? As a refuge, as a consolation? For knowledge, for pleasure, for help, for forgetfulness? She was not athirst for knowledge, unless it might be that she could learn how spoilt women could find an easy way to unspoil; unless she could learn how to shift a burden, that neither exercise nor society could lighten, off her shoulders; unless she could be taught how to get rid of the last year of her life as though it had never been, and begin it all over again.

The book which she had hold of was well worn, its purple binding and its gilt edges bore traces of use. Its title, *Sesame and Lilies*, told her nothing, conveyed nothing to her mind; but when she turned the pages and saw the heading 'Of Queen's Gardens,' she sat herself down and began deliberately to read. 'Of Queen's Gardens,' she had been nicknamed by her lost comrade Queen Bab, and with gardens she was familiar; the

title was a likely one. Self in some disguise is the person whom the egotistical reader seeks between the covers. Bab wanted to read something that others read for knowledge? for pleasure? for help? for forgetfulness?

The book was full of wonderful things; Jack had talked in that sort of manner to her once, talked what he had called Greek to her in the kitchen amongst the dish-covers and beetles, and beside poor old Venom's death-bed.

That once-dead, once incomprehensible language was writ on the pages here, now she had got hold of some kind of a crib by the help of which she could spell out the meaning. She was not a practised reader, she read slowly, re-reading and pausing to think, all her mind in her book.

'Reading, Miss Bab,' said a voice at her shoulder. 'You, reading?'

'I learned to read, Becket, a long while ago.'

'There's better things in life than in print, miss. Here's a parcel for you, four and threepence to pay too: how the presents do begin to come in.'

When Mrs. Fenwick came into the room she found Bab and Becket on their knees before an open box, in which shavings and tissue-paper and Dresden china abounded. Her poor, shallow Bab! what gifts, both rich and rare, had been wasted upon her.

CHAPTER XXII.

All of us have cause
To wail the dimming of our shining star.

Richard III.

'You must shift your sail to the wind.'

A RAILWAY journey is the sort of infliction which its victims should, if possible, tackle, not anticipate. Bab

wished, on the morning of that ninth of March, that her betrothed had let his old directions stand ; dawdling through half an idle day in apprehension of shake, and shunt, and whistle, and relations-in-the-law was weary work, she wanted to be off, and to get her trials over.

Of course she spent her morning out of doors, the house was never big enough for Bab, but the warmth, the spring-like atmosphere of the air had been blown away by a risen, and ever-rising, north-east wind, which brought with it, ever and anon, a scud of fine snow that melted as it fell on the still warm earth.

The quivering gentian and crocus shrivelled in the sharp gusts of wind, even the dogs sneaked away from their mistress and stole indoors to the great fire in the hall. Overhead the sky was imprinted with prophetic mare's tails ; within, the barometer was unsteady, threatening.

Chilled and somewhat disgusted by this sudden return of winter, Bab went up to her room before lunch to give Rawle directions for the strapping of the rugs and cloaks such as would be necessary for the comfort of the journey, and found her poor maid flushed, heavy-eyed, hoarse as a crow, and fit for nothing.

'Are you ill ? What's the matter ?'

'My throat's as raw as a steak, miss, and my head is working like a traction-engine, and I never closed my eyes all night.'

These symptoms were in truth alarming ; Bab sent for Mrs. Fenwick and for her clinical thermometer, of which a little knowledge is so disquieting a thing.

Bab was more independent of a maid's services than are some girls, but, nevertheless, it was tiresome that, on this special occasion, Rawle should knock up. For Rawle's temperature being found to be half a point or so above normal, she instantly grew worse and was put to bed and the doctor sent for ; her young mistress

undertaking the care of her own bag, her own rugs, her own trunk, and ill-humoured Marquis and his chain, all the long way to Tregarvis.

Becket would dearly have liked to take Rawle's place, and had a look at Tregarvis and its inmates for herself, but Bab would have none of her.

'You are wanted at home, Becket, especially if Rawle's going to be laid up. No, I won't have you. I can manage all right.'

Becket, poor old Becket, over matutinal chocolate, over pig-tailing, over every duty of hers how she would talk, how she could talk, how she did talk of Peels, of Peels, of Peels. Silence was—Bab had heard the proverb, and knew now something of its meaning—silence was golden.

The train by which Bab was to travel left Tipton at four o'clock. As the hour for the start drew near, the wind blew very high, and was so cold that Mrs. Fenwick stripped Bab of her smart coat, with cape on cape, with pockets innumerable, with buttons large as crowns, and induced her to put on a long, heavy sealskin, a luxury of the trousseau, which covered her from her little ears to her ankles, and which was warm enough for the Arctic regions.

It was a shapeless garment, concealing the trimness of the tweed gown, muffling the lines of the graceful figure, but, withal, most becoming to her charming face and in tone with a brown, red-winged hat. A hat that had, now that snow was on the ground, a robin-redbreast seasonable sort of aspect about it.

Mrs. Fenwick had not lived for a quarter of a century amongst the hills and vales of Devon without becoming weather-wise. As they drove together, her daughter and she, to the station, she looked out of the carriage-window at the landscape with unsatisfied, apprehensive eyes.

'Bab, I can't bear your starting off alone on such a

cold, windy day ; if your father had been at Combe, I'm sure he would have kept you at home. The wind is fierce and bitterly cold.'

But Bab was warm, eager, even a little excited. She pooh-poohed her mother's fears ; she was not inclined to shirk the journey—she wished to get it over, that was all.

'At five-forty Stanhope meets me. Cold ? Oh, no, not very. Hot-water tins and rugs will keep us comfortable.'

'The sky looks threatening, listen to the wind. I'm afraid of more snow, Bab.'

'It's March, mother ; it's too late for snow, and this wind will blow the clouds away.'

Mrs. Fenwick pointed to the thick, lowering fog which, pale and yellow as a young daffodil, blotted out the hills.

'You never see clouds, Bab, you never did ; but I do, and I hate your travelling to-day. You must send me a telegram the moment you arrive.'

'Five foot eight and nine stone eleven, mother, won't get blown out of the carriage-window—she won't, indeed ! I like a storm, I love it ; my spirits rise with the wind.'

'And mine go down, Bab. A wind always depresses me.'

It depressed the poor Marquis too. Illegitimately shorn of his coat he sat, shivering, on the seat opposite to the speaker, pricking his ears when the wind howled, and looking wretched.

Tipton Station was sheltered from the north-east by high ground. The strength of the wind was not felt on the platform, and Mrs. Fenwick had time to feel reassured by the comparative calmness of the weather, before every sensible or lucid idea of hers was banished by the sight of a certain rough frieze coat, and a certain dear, unlucky young man within it.

Jack Holland, to whom she had said a dreadful good-bye, with a wrung heart, only a score of hours ago, was getting his ticket in the booking-office. He was saying 'How d'ye do?' to Bab just as an unconcerned acquaintance might do, and answering her genial questions cheerily.

'Yes, he was going by the four o'clock train, going to Plymouth, he had some things to do there, Mitchell-Innes was there,—he did not sail till Friday.'

Bab was, unreservedly, delighted to meet him; unreservedly delighted that they could travel part of the way together, quite incapable, of course, of dreaming that he had selected such an inconveniently slow and late train for the purpose of avoiding the very possibility of this disturbing encounter,—over which she, demonstratively, congratulated herself and him.

Mrs. Fenwick stood open-eyed, a dumb spectator of the little scene in the booking-office. Bab was smiling into Jack's face.

'I'm so glad, it is lucky to have come across you, Jack; mother has been flurrying herself because the wind's rough. Mother, I shan't get blown away with Jack to block the window. Jack, that's a third-class ticket—third-class. Then I shall come third myself—yes, third *and smoking*, if you mean to smoke.'

This was to be her attitude towards him, this insipid friendliness, these empty genialities were his portion, as they had ever been; they would be offered to him for two hours, such as they were he would take them.

'You shan't do that, I'll change my ticket,' said Jack, with a glance at Mrs. Fenwick, to see what she thought of the situation.

As he spoke, the train came into sight, and in a bustle and turmoil the travellers took their places, for the Marquis flew at the guard before Bab got him into her

own carriage, and there was a scramble for Bab's dressing-bag, and a scare about a lost-and-found port-manteau. Meanwhile, a sudden sweep of furious wind assailed Mrs. Fenwick on the platform, wrenching at her bonnet and blowing her back from the train, out of reach of Jack's outstretched hand.

There was no time for farewells, there was no time to think about the situation before the situation itself—Jack, with his white constrained face, and Bab, radiant and somewhat excited, opposite to him—were out of reach; Mrs. Fenwick stood and watched the train as it curved round the hill out of her sight. Mary had been warned not to play at Providence, and now she wondered why Providence had planned this meeting; she would not have dared to send such a couple spinning westward alone, with a parting before them and a long, long trail of memories in the past. She thought of her future son-in-law, that man of two ideas, that man who cared so little for anything save for himself and his dinner. Her sense of honour was dwindling in her breast; had she been Providence it would have fared ill with poor Mr. Peel; but the wind blew frostily, starving the vague fears, that seemed half hopes, with which she had no business to trifle.

Paradise was vibrating, oblong, and draughty; for the first few minutes of their journey Jack and Bab were occupied in getting such comfort as rugs and hot-water tins would afford them. The Marquis was an officious chaperon, he growled when the stranger interfered with any of the lady's belongings, and showed his teeth at every fresh blast of wind; he was cross, unfriendly, and not to be propitiated. Though the noise of the storm half drowned her voice, Bab talked a great deal, she did most part of the conversation.

Jack leaned forward to catch her words, one hand fidgeting with the strap of the window, the other

clasping a roll of newspapers; his head was bare, his cap lay on the seat beside him.

He was settling down to the circumstances which she had taken quite as a matter of mutual congratulation.

The storm was a great help to him, it was a sort of third, constraining presence, louder than the beating of his heart, stronger than the tumultuous rush of old emotions—a presence to remind him that this carriage did not hold the whole wide world on a quartette of cushions.

Bab shouted her news to him in so rational a way as to calm that first flow of feeling, just in the old strain she told him all the small bits of news concerning birds and beasts; after all, she had not altered, not much at least, her hazel eyes were clear and straight and fearless, they met his. Suddenly in the midst of a sentence she broke off, her lips faltered, she hesitated. What was the matter? The rugs were round her, he stooped to feel the tin at her feet, she was not cold, physically she was all right.

‘What did you say about Brunette? tell me—or are you tired?’

‘Isn’t the wind worse than it was?’

‘A regular gale—are you tired?’

‘No, but I thought I was boring you, you weren’t listening, were you? Stanhope hates to be talked to if he’s travelling. It makes his head ache.’

Her face took an unfamiliar expression even as she spoke, as though her words had brought with them a serious train of thought. What had Bab in her mind to which he was a stranger? What underlying current of thought shadowed her eyes?

Jealousy can burn in the teeth of a north-easter. Why should a man be unreasonably jealous of a thought, or a change of mind, who has not been downright jealous of a rival in flesh and blood?

‘You will not make my head ache, Bab.’

But she was not to be reassured, she leaned forward and looked wistfully, yes, wistfully, questioningly into his face.

‘I have been spoilt,’ she said. ‘You spoilt me, every one spoilt me. I have found it out, Jack,—at least Stanhope found it out for me—and I read the book you used to read aloud to mother. I’m—I’m—you’ll write sometimes from India, Jack?’

The rushing wind mingled with, half-smothering her words, which Jack evidently did not wholly catch, for he did not say that she was not spoilt, he did not seem any longer to be interested in her morals, for he called her attention to the outside world across which snow was driving.

‘It’s nearly dark already, the sky’s like a feather-bed, and it’s ten degrees colder than when we started.’

‘There is going to be a real storm.’

‘Yes, it’s getting more genuine every moment. Move a little to the left, will you, Bab, the snow is as fine as powder, it’s filtering through the crack of the window. I’ll stuff a *Daily Graphic* down.’

The wind blew intermittently, though the gusts followed each other in quick succession; presently when the line ran across a high, unsheltered track the carriage shook and trembled in the gale, with a nasty suggestion of insecurity.

‘I think you had better get out at the next station, Bab, and put up for the night.’

‘Stanhope is going to meet me at the junction.’

‘Send him a wire.’

She pondered for a moment.

‘Do you think there is any danger?’

‘No, but it’s beastly cold and uncomfortable, you would be better at a hotel.’

‘I’d much rather go on, the wind may drop at any moment, but if you think I ought to——’

‘There is no ought, do exactly what you wish.’

‘Ah, that was just what you always let me do,’ laughing for a moment, and then awed to gravity by a headlong rush of wind.

When the elements get out of hand, we very big people dwindle in our own conceit, we forbear tall talk, we no longer spell humanity with a capital aitch, we feel that our awe is the largest part of us.

‘The stoutest heart may quail’ when it is summoned to face a power the limit, the strength, the purpose of which is all alike a mystery. Bab stopped laughing abruptly, and just then the train slackened speed and ran into the shelter of a large station.

Walls broke the force of the gale, the snow was shut out; here, where the wind was not threatening but merely facetious, where it did no more damage than to scud off hats, flutter cloaks, and pinch the faces it touched blue with cold, the aspect brightened. There was a small group of willing travellers upon the platform, waiting to take their seats in the train, and ready to defy the weather.

‘This is Lexmindon,’ said Jack, beginning to collect his goods.

‘Then you think that I had better not go on?’ said Bab, rising, but most reluctantly. ‘It’s very awkward, Jack, Stanhope will think it is absurd to be afraid when all these people are travelling. Do let us go on, at any rate a little further.’

‘But I change here.’

She reseated herself.

‘Ah, yes, I had forgotten.’

Heretofore she would have put the transparent wish, which was written on her tell-tale face, into plain words, but now she said the most eloquent thing in the world that could be said, according to the understanding of her comrade, she said—nothing.

The force of her eloquence was so mighty that it thrust aside the score which he had set against her, so that he, falling back into his old weak ways, returned his sticks to the rack and his dressing-case to the floor.

‘I’ll go on with you, Bab, as far as the junction. You are under my care, and Mrs. Fenwick will expect me to look after you.’

‘But how will you get to Plymouth?’

‘I could only catch the 5.10, it’s an awfully slow train, I couldn’t go by it, anyway, in this weather. No, no, I’ll come to the junction and put up there, and go down to Plymouth first thing in the morning, it will suit me just as well. You need not say all these nice things. Do you think it’s a punishment to see you into legitimate custody, Bab?’

He talked her thanks down, and tore off to see to his luggage and his ticket.

For how many minutes, hours, weeks, months had he not been wrenching himself free from bondage, servitude, captivity, had he not torn out the bleeding past by the root and filled the gap with calm, cool, healing reason. Only that morning, that very morning he had called things by their right name, only that morning he had been clear in the head, steady about the heart.

He had laughed at a dead infatuation, he had stamped upon the corpse and found it cold, nay, frozen first and melted later, as those flakes of snow had melted on the still warm earth.

But now, now, a miracle had befallen that buried miasma ; it was—it was glowing, alive, deep-rooted, dear, indestructible, its owner gloried in its possession ; a man may rejoice who regains his inheritance, but there is little joy in finding his birthright in a neighbour’s holding.

Feelings are misleading, facts are stubborn and clear ; amongst the porters and portmanteaux Jack recovered his mental balance. He was on escort duty, a duty

which compelled him to deliver Queen Bab safe to a kingdom which she had elected to govern; he had no right to feel anything but moderate interest in her remarks; if she had changed, if she was a thousandfold more dear, if he swore that he would cherish his long-grown love for her as an honour, not fight it as an enemy, yet for all that she was bound for Tregarvis, and he was bound for the Far East.

He must get off to a smoking-carriage and pull himself into order. The unexpected was said to happen in this world, it had certainly happened to him; yesterday, to-day again he was bewildered by the unforeseen, the unprepared-for; he must get away and collect his wits.

Great heavens, what a hurricane blew! the air, stiff with cold as a snow-laden nor'-easter alone can be, chilled him to the bone.

'Rough night, sir, not many travelling,' a porter said. 'Take your seats.'

Jack went back to the train and found that an oldish man and a fat, shivering woman, with a basket, had been domiciled by a friendly guard in Bab's compartment.

'I'm going to have a pipe, Bab. See you again later on.'

He slammed the door to.

'The train doesn't stop till the junction,' she said; but the reiterated order to 'take your places' was the only response she got.

Jack hurried on to his smoking-carriage, somewhere in the fore-part of the short and empty train.

CHAPTER XXIII.

For now the wind begins to blow ;
Thunder above, and deeps below.

Pericles.

‘Have not thy cloak to make when it begins to rain.’

Now began such a night as no west-country man or woman had ever experienced, or learned to dread ; a night that is unique in the annals of their counties. Now began such a journey as men and women, whose ill-fortune led them to travel westward—ho ! during that disastrous ninth of March, will remember so long as they can remember anything.

Though the women forget their age and the men their dinner, yet will they have tales to tell of the great blizzard—the impressive, the expensive, the inexorable blizzard.

It was impossible even to British travellers of distinct caste to hold their tongues on such an abnormal night, in such a stress of weather. Bab soon found out the history of her companions. It seemed that the dame was a small farmer’s wife on her way home from a visit to a married daughter, and that the man, her brother, was a traveller for a London firm of wine-merchants. The woman’s heart was with her sheep, and fowls, and calves, and lambs, and crops. She moaned and groaned her apprehensions, mingled with her reminiscences of the destruction wrought by the storm of eighty-one. Her brother had no personal anxiety ; he was intelligently interested in weather, full of ugly prognostications which pleased him as much as they disquieted his hearers.

As soon as the train steamed out of the temporary shelter of the station, it became apparent that, during the few past minutes, the storm had increased in violence.

Sheets of fine snow—condensed, thick as a London fog

—whirled overhead from every quarter at once, driven by conflicting winds at a prodigious rate. Never lessening, the fall grew each moment faster, wilder, more fierce.

Heavy, indigo clouds drove across the dull, yellow atmosphere, skimming the tree-tops and shutting out the landscape like a curtain. The snow enclosed them ; from north, and south, and east, and west the gale beat it earthwards. The cold was intense, and Jack had left his rug behind him. Bab offered it to her fellow-travellers who sat to leeward, roaring their dread remarks to one another and to her with chattering teeth. Poor Jack ! no rug on such an arctic night. Poor bride-elect ! alone, beguiled of her protector by a pipe ; left in the loud, continual uproar of the menacing hurricane, alone.

Well, she had been alone a good deal off and on of late ; to do her justice, her fortitude was great, she could ' suffer and be still ' as well as her less pampered sisters could do. She could keep a firm lip and a bold front though she was frozen, deafened, and solitary.

There was no bombast left in the poor Marquis ; he curled himself into a ball in her lap, shivering and shuddering.

' Look at the snow, William, driving like crumbs of ice, there's not a flake the size of a pea. 'Twas bad enough in eighty-one, but then it fell, reasonable, in flakes. This would blind a body. Dear, dear ! there'll be a dale of trouble getting to the outlying fields.'

' Nothing but an engine could make head against this hurricane, Susan.'

' It is too bad to last,' said the third of the party, quoting a very hopeful theory she had heard. ' The wind must drop presently.'

But the wind did not drop ; on the contrary, it lashed itself to great and ever greater violence, howling and bellowing overhead.

Hitherto the train had kept up its usual rate of speed,

but gradually it began to slacken pace, halting on its way; it did not stop, but kept creeping slowly forward along the line.

The lamps in the carriage had not been lit, premature darkness had set in, it was no longer possible to see across the compartment. The lack of light at such a time added to its wretchedness; even the sight of the blue, awe-struck faces of the petrified strangers would have been better than no sight at all.

Nevertheless, Bab kept up her spirits, and when she did yell a remark, she yelled it hopefully.

'We aren't getting along much;' the woman had buried her face in her shawl, she was beating her cold feet on the floor; 'we shall pull up in a moment, and then the Lord knows what will become of us.'

'Tis wonderful,' roared her reflective brother, 'how man's servant can hold his own against nature's; the train keeps on where none of us could stand, Susan.'

'Don't call this nature,' retorted the dame, 'if 'tisn't from the Almighty, it's straight from Satan, that's what 'tis. Nature don't send snow with the birds building, and the lambs about, and the flowers out. Oh, my sakes, how it blows! there's a draught fit to cut my legs off, William.'

'Never mind your legs if you save your head. Did you hear that crash alongside the carriage? A fir-tree down, maybe, or yet a telegraph-pole. This is a gale, and no mistake. You come down to leeward, ma'am; if there is any safety for us 'tis to be had this side of the train.'

Bab did as was suggested; on the train crawled; laboriously, slowly on.

'I wish it would stop,' she said, 'just for a moment.'

'The gentleman little thought 'twould turn out such a business as this,' the woman compassionated her deserted neighbour, 'or he wouldn't have left you, I warrant.'

‘No,’ said Bab, ‘I’m sure he would have stayed. At any rate, I’m sure—he would have taken his rug.’

For one blessed minute the wind lulled ; the man lit a match, by the light of which he looked at his watch.

‘We are two hours behind time already ; it’s eight o’clock. Even at this rate of going we ought to be at Kidford Junction shortly.’

He got up from his seat and tried to peer out through the blurred glass of the window.

‘Can’t see your hand before your face, Susan ; but I reckon we must be the other side of Brigston. I wouldn’t be in the engine-driver’s place, not for the wage of a Prime Minister.’

As he spoke, back came the wind with tenfold fury. Like volley after volley of artillery it thundered up from afar off, and broke against the reeling train ; the carriage shuddered, rocked, paused, and then crawled on again, the tempest shrieking overhead.

The woman caught hold of Bab by the arm, holding her tight and crying, ‘God save us, we are crossing the viaduct, the high, bare viaduct,—close home, William, it’s close home.’

The forward motion of the quaking train continued.

‘We haven’t left the line,’ said Bab, ‘it’s all safe, we are on the rails.’

‘The lady’s right, Susan ; another hundred yards and we turn down the deep cutting into covert.’

‘So near—home,’ cried the woman, ‘so near, please God we’ll get in safe now, we are so near.’

She had forgotten her live stock and her crops, poor soul, looking at a grim end of swedes, and rent, and cattle face to face.

Bab laid one firm hand on the trembling Marquis, the other clasped her neighbour’s ; she sat cold, speechless, but undaunted, staring into the darkness, the blackness of the utter darkness around her.

Then the tottering train grew steady, it jolted and strained, but the sickening insecure rocking on the rails was over, done with ; and they told each other that they were entering the shelter of the deep cutting, that the viaduct was past.

There was but little talking amongst the trio now ; the man's imagination could suggest nothing more appalling than the present state of affairs, the woman was breathing thick and fast, and sobbing over ' Sydney and the children.' Bab's tongue stiffened beneath her chattering teeth, the horny hand in hers was the hand of a stranger, it was bad luck that if she had got to die, she could not feel a friend's hand in hers through the valley ; Jack was so near and yet out of her reach : she should not have felt a qualm of this cold fear had he been a sharer in the rugs.

Hitherto, the travellers had, heaven be praised, made continuous progress, but now this one hopeful part of a terrible journey was to be brought to an end ; for, after one or two premonitory jolts, the train came to a standstill.

' It's all right, we are at the station.'

' Bless her heart,' said the woman, ' she says " it's all right " every time she opens her lips ; we must be a couple of miles from the junction if we are a step.'

' I don't know why they pull up here, 'tis a wildish part of the moor here about,' the speaker had his nose against the window-pane, though he might as well have pressed it against the woodwork as far as a chance of seeing went. ' Maybe there's a tree or a telegraph-pole across the line : 'tis a miracle we haven't got blocked before now.'

' In eighty-one the snow drifted in the cutting here twenty feet high and more ; the snow's a worse barrier than a tree, William. It's the snow that's stopping us, depend upon it. Oh, dear, dear, I wish they'd push on ;

when the engine stops, her wheels get clogged up and scrambled. In the dark here we forget there's snow as well as gale to kill us, if God Almighty minds to.'

In truth, for many hours now masses of thick snow had been whirled earthwards by the blizzard. The fury of the wind was such that it blew the vapour in the atmosphere into solidity, it consolidated the vapour, without allowing time for the formation of a snowflake, and hurled it in vast masses across the land, sweeping the powdered snow in sheets off the exposed tracks and rolling it up in huge quantities against house, or hedge, or hill, wheresoever a barrier was found.

But these three prisoners could only guess at causes while they suffered effects.

'They are backing the train,' said the man, 'we got jammed in a drift, that's what 'tis; they will have another go at it and force a track through.'

Jolting uneasily, the train laboured back, cutting through snow on its way; then there was a pause, followed by a rush forward, during which the travellers held their breath. Two or three times the manœuvre was repeated, but to no purpose, though the train went gallantly at the unseen barrier; the third push forward was checked harshly, the carriage jarred, vibrated, shuddered, and stopped.

'We are tight in now, and no mistake.'

'Do you think we could go to the others?'

'No, no, my dear; ' the dame was becoming motherly in the intimacy of misfortune, 'you couldn't stand in the storm. We're better off where we are. The gentleman will come here to you if there is any chance for him to do it, you may be sure. Get out, you'd get out to your death.'

The carriage was steady now, and it was stationary; as the wretched minutes passed, misfortune took a fresh aspect. They no longer battled through the blast, they

were beaten by it. The din and tumult were no longer right about their ears ; the gale blew like fury, but it did not blow against the carriage.

'We have got into a regular bed of snow ;' the man was letting down the window to leeward, and putting out a reconnoitring hand ; 'it's right up past the window already, and falling like Niagara. There'll be no getting out, and no getting home for any one of us this night.'

'Well, we are safe enough here, anyhow,' said Miss Fenwick, breaking cheerfully through the lamentations of her neighbour. 'Come over this way,' hospitably, 'into the corner out of the draught.'

'And into the snow. Dear heart alive, I'm cramped so in my jints I can't move. There, I'd give every acre we've got for a candle and a cup of tea.'

Neither candle nor tea were to be had, yet these wayfarers were not left to starve inert on this disastrous journey. Bab suggested that as they had to spend an indefinite time in a snowdrift, it would be nice to have something to eat. No one came near them, nothing happened ; it was difficult to be energetic when the blood ran cold in shivering veins, when feet and hands, congealed and stiff, ached heavily, and were too numb to use.

But the man and Bab were both adepts at making the best of things, they worked in harmony. She took her spirit-lamp from her dressing-bag and lit the feeble flame, a poor light enough, but by it they stuffed up cracks and crannies through which the snow indrifted ; they must, if possible, exclude the snow which melted in the carriage, adding dampness to the biting cold. They beat their numbed arms upon their breasts, circulating their blood by that painful method, and talking, with mutual confidence, of the coming deliverance, pressing their unfounded cheerfulness upon their weeping comrade.

Then the man found his bag on the rack overhead, and searched in it for some small sample bottles of wine which it contained. A draught of port had good effect upon the damo's spirits ; though much against the grain, she presently unearthed in her basket a sitting of choice eggs, which she was taking home to set beneath a hen, and offered them to her companions.

'If ever I do get back, my dear, they won't come to nothing now. Take one, do ; you must eat to live at such a time as this.'

Bab, remorselessly, sucked one of the prized embryo houdans, it was sickly food. Then she drank a good draught of wine, but she, who was a water-drinker, was so wearied out by the strain of that calamitous night that she felt small effect of the stimulant.

So often did the lamp blow out that the matches were exhausted ; in darkness and dreariness they settled themselves down to wear out the night. Sleep was impossible, the bitterness of the piercing cold, the deafening uproar, the keen anxiety drove it out of the question. Every posture the poor people essayed was more uneasy than the last, each passing hour more hard to endure.

Bab had had a snubbing for one of her reiterated falsehoods about the all-rightness of the intolerable situation, and had relapsed into silence. The wine which had cheered the man and woman had gone in some unaccountable way to her head ; she did not want to think ; but above her the blast bellowed, taking human tones in its cries, despairing human tones, and she did think, she thought of the sailors at sea, of lonely travellers, of the terror of the night, great throbs of compassion for those who had no wine, no eggs, no shelter moved her.

Twelve hours for sleep, twelve hours for amusement, had been her way of taking existence. If this was the

end of the world, if this was her last night upon the pleasant earth, what had she to show for her life?

What 'Of Queen's Gardens'?

She was too wholesomely straight and frank to be morbid, she did not pick up the manifold miseries which mankind creates, fosters, cultivates by disobedience to given laws, and lay them a great obscuring blot between herself and light. But she had begun to see that the world was not a playground, she had begun to find life was serious, she had begun to suspect that she would do well to take it seriously, she had begun to recognize that hearts as well as frozen hands and feet can hurt.

She knew that the terrible shrieking of the blizzard made her extremely disinclined to be cheerful.

And all the while she stared out into the darkness, waiting.

At length the looked-for moment came, the door to leeward was pulled open for a little space, in a whirling circle of snow a dark figure thrust itself with difficulty through the aperture, closed the door to behind him, and turned the light of a lantern upon the travellers.

The incomer was none other than the guard of the train; he stood there looking critically at the wretched trio, dazed, overloaded with responsibility, and dismally uncommunicative. He was concerned for his passengers' bodies which were in his charge, but he could not undertake the soothing of their minds.

In good sooth he was a man of ice, snow was on his head, his hat, his coat, he was white as an iced cake, his blue face was contorted with the cold.

A terrible night? he should think it was; he'd been the best part of two hours in getting from carriage to carriage, they were the last lot in the train, the engine and the two foremost carriages were embedded in a drift; the gentleman in the smoking compartment was safe in one of them, and likely to stay there till he was

dug out. Spend the night there? the Lord save them, they'd be more like to spend a week there. Get out? they must be mad; blinding damnation was blowing and no man could stand, let alone a young lady. The poles were strewn about like rotten twigs. The Lord alone knew how the speaker should get help, but things might change with sunrise.

'Wine, port wine? yes, yes, not for him, but for the wretched engine-driver, who was clammed with the cold and dying,' so he feared, 'in his van.' Bab, in her generosity, gave away a bottle of her neighbour's store, which was not a very popular move.

'Couldn't you give some to the man in the smoking-carriage too, guard? do try.'

But he would promise nothing, save to return himself at daybreak, and he and his blessed lantern, with its cheering light, went out again into the darkness.

Slowly, painfully, gloomily, that night of fear, of danger, of necessity, wore to its close.

CHAPTER XXIV.

'... Never more a queen
Than in the laying down
Of sceptre and of crown.'

'Winter finds out what summer lays up.'

DAZED and dull, conscious of but one great longing, and that neither for deliverance nor for daylight, but a weak, mundane desire for a cup of tea, a steaming cup of hot sweet tea, Bab saw the daylight creep into the carriage.

Slowly the darkness lifted, the outlines of her substantial neighbour showed against the window; the candid dawn stole through the driving masses of snow without, through the hoary panes of glass, and illumined the grim condition of the ill-fated trio.

If the sun was rising as usual in the heavens, if nature was not revolutionized, they might abate their awe; the storm was not a forerunner of terrors, the last day was not at hand, after all.

Cold, weak, ill they might be, but they were no longer tragic. They talked in odd hoarse voices, not afraid to look forward, not afraid to speak of their past fears, able to trust themselves to self-pity.

The travellers could open the window to leeward and clear out thence the drift of melting snow which, through ventilator and roof, through unsuspected cracks and crannies, had penetrated the compartment; they could suck another egg apiece and lament the want of wine.

Daylight meant hope, it brought comfort, with it deliverance must come; but their deliverance came tardily, the dawn was an old story, light was strong before the guard, with Jack Holland at his heels, brought them greeting.

The womenkind showed their inferior strength by their silence, they could neither of them speak at the first glimpse of their visitors; for once in a way the men had all the conversation to themselves, and they did not waste any time over the past, they talked of the future. Both were ruddy with exercise; since dawn they had been at work with spade and shovel, digging a way down the side of the train; their haggard eyes, bloodshot and heavy, told a tale.

Still the wind blew like fury, still it whirled the snow at a blinding gallop north, and south, and east, and west, but in daylight it was an easy matter to avoid the drifts and to steer clear of fallen and falling trees, 'and it would be best,' Jack said, 'to get across to a farmhouse which lay handy to the rail, it would be best to get to warmth and shelter even if the struggle thither was rough.'

The cramped, weak, worn-out women did not jump at

the thought of the battle to shelter ; the dame would not budge from her corner of the carriage.

‘I’m half mazed with the cold, and I’m fallen abroad and not so spry as I was. I’ll bide where I am, if you will let me. My master will come after me soon, please God. I’ll wait where I am, and William with me, I don’t doubt.’

‘To be sure,’ said the brother, ‘I’ll stick to the train. The company will be sending relief gangs with the snow-plough ; we are not more than a mile and three-quarters to Kidford at most.’

‘Tisn’t three hundred yards to the farm,’ said Jack, pointing across the fields. ‘Come, Bab, come, the storm is lighter, we can manage that distance. I don’t think it wise to let you stay here, perished and starving. It will want a most almighty snow-plough to cut up these growing drifts. Heaven knows when the train will get off. Come on.’

‘Good luck go with you, my dear ; it most made me cross to hear the young lady back along, sir. “It’s all right,” said she, when the carriage was blowing off the viaduct ; “It’s all right,” said she, when we got dranged up in the snow. Good-bye, my dear ; if we can’t get along home, and if the wind drops a bit, I’ll follow you where you’re going.’

‘You’d far better go to the farm,’ said the guard : ‘but we’ve sent along for help here, and it mayn’t be long coming.’

‘Come, Bab,’ Jack was persistent ; it seemed likely that the storm might return at any moment. He meant to get his charge to shelter.

She rose slowly ; it was difficult to talk, her jaws shuddered and shook. Her head was light, she was exhausted, incapable of reasoning, it was not pleasant to face the tempest thus.

Jack took the snarling but feeble Marquis under his

arm, and with his free hand helped Bab to get out of the carriage.

She saw nothing but a great whiteness, white pyramids towering above her, white clouds circling round her head. Furiously the snow attacked her, blinding her, cutting her face and ears.

'That's right, Bab, don't be afraid. Hold up a moment, you are stiff at starting. Behind the drift here there is a clear, sheltered pass, to the right; a little to the right. There is not room for two abreast, but follow me; catch hold of my coat, it will help you. That's capital, you are feeling your feet.'

If those frozen encumbrances were her feet, she was certainly feeling them; but she could not help herself by aid of his coat, her hands were too numbed to be tenacious. She plodded on painfully, following him.

But when they emerged from the comparative shelter of embankment and snowdrifts into the teeth of the wind, Bab gave a cry for help; she was as powerless to stand against this fearful hurricane, as though she had no five feet eight of sinewed stature to call to her aid. The wind lifted her off her feet, and blew her across the turf upon her face.

Jack dropped the Marquis and helped her up; she gave a faint, nervous laugh, she had no breath for words, and clung to him—without his hand, literally, she could not stand. Linking his arm in hers, step by step they battled along in the blast: now unable to make an inch of way and barely capable of preserving their footing; now whirled along at a run; now attacked on the flank; now beaten downward, for the blizzard stuck to no special quarter, but veered continually.

There was no snow at all on the many-acred, high-lying field which they forded, but up against the house whither they made their way it lay piled, stacked high

over the ground-floor windows, in places reaching to the very eaves.

Struggling round to leeward, they found the back door open and accessible; in the yard were a couple of men digging a passage, through comparatively thin-lying snow, to the out-houses. A ladder was placed against an upper window, a ladder which had been the only egress for the inmates of the farm until the spades had cleared a milky-way below.

The farm was a small one, and its owners were nearly mad with their woes; small blame to them if their hospitality wanted warming, if they looked askance at guests in their desolation.

The sheep and lambs were out, the Lord knew where; but half the cattle were housed; the dogs and poultry were silent under the snow. All night the poor souls had been up, barricading doors and windows; awaiting their doom in the indrifting snow and the petrifying cold; no fire could live on such a night, the wind blew flames and smoke into the rooms.

The gale had lessened, it was more manageable now, and the farmer, and the farmer's wife and daughters, were hard at work saving what might be saved out of the havoc wrought: mitigating what might be mitigated of the damage done within and without.

On the weather side of the house the devastation was complete: great elms were torn up by the roots; the apple-trees in the orchard lay like cabbages strewn on the ground, the garden was wrecked; the glass of the lean-to greenhouse had been shattered, the framework, leadwork, and woodwork had alike disappeared. Slates and tiles were ripped off the roofs of the out-houses, windows had been damaged by the scattered branches of falling trees.

Jack heard, with a show of patience, the farmer's history of that night of ruin, then he soothed his host's

ear with a mighty big promise, which cleared the way for poor tottering Bab to shelter and to rest.

'Poor Bab,' said her pilot, leading her over the flags to the kitchen within, 'you are glad to get indoors at last, I know.'

Their host showed them into the kitchen, where a bucket of live coals on the hearth did duty for a fire. He begged that his guests would make free with what they could find; and he set some bread and cheese, a piece of cold pork, and a jug of cider on the deal table; and then, with that dour self-possession born of supreme affliction, he left them, saying that all hands were wanted without, and that he couldn't bide loitering about, whatever.

The infinite peace, the wondrous relief of shelter! To stand unbuffeted between walls with a roof overhead, to hear the tempest screaming and yet not to feel it, to be shut off from the dazzling snow, to have a wickerwork chair, with a patchwork cushion in it, drawn close to glowing coals; to be at rest, how good it was! And yet Bab was so foolish as to shudder and break down in the midst of luxury. She was crying, she knew not why, nor wherefore. She must be a little off her head to cry in the wicker-chair, when she had not cried without in the bitterness of wind and snow, but she covered her face with her hands and sobbed her heart out.

'It's all over now, Bab, don't cry now.'

'There isn't anything—th—the matter, only I'm such an—such an—idiot.'

He was shaking the snow off her coat, undoing its fastenings, and throwing it back from her throat. The smart robin hat was all on one side, the scarlet wing was broken; dexterously he got out the long pin that held the battered shape to her plaits, and he put the patchwork cushion behind her head. She let him unlace

her wet boots and take them off, not thanking him for his offices, but crying on weakly all the while, as a child cries who is tired out.

Then he went out of the room, and was absent for some minutes, returning with a heavy blue and green plaid shawl and a carpet footstool; the latter he put under her feet. Then he got off the sealskin coat and wrapped her head and shoulders in the shawl. She was half asleep now, her tears were dry, her eyes drooping and dull, the hot fire was taking effect; the painful weariness was losing itself in drowsiness, the wholesome fatigue of that frantic battle through the wind was overcoming her.

He did not attempt to talk to her, he set, noiselessly, to work about her welfare, he let her, just for a time, forget all her burning anxieties, let her forget who was, insane, no doubt, with apprehension, on her track; who was, no doubt, facing blizzard and frost-bite, even possible annihilation, to reach her. Poor Peel, poor fellow! Jack had had a bad night of it, but the former's tortures were prolonged till now, till now. He was leaning over the coals with a saucepan in his hand, it rattled against the scuttle. Bab looked up dreamily.

'Mother will be frightened, Jack, won't she?'

'She won't know that you did not get to Tregarvis last night.'

'You must try to send her a telegram, and——'

'And—what?'

'One to—yes, you had better send it,' disconnectedly, 'to Stanhope too. He won't worry, he never worries; he'll know that I shall turn up all right.'

To her weary ears the gale no longer dinned and clanged, its roar grew musical, melodious, a lullaby that forced sleep upon her, that drugged her power of thought. She hated to be disturbed, but, nevertheless, Jack perversely disturbed her with a mug of hot cider,

which he insisted upon her drinking to the dregs. The cider, though tart and rough, was not unpalatable to her Devonshire throat, but she protested against the bread and cheese which her caretaker forced upon her, nibbling reluctantly through the prescribed portions.

‘I do so want a cup of tea, Jack.’

‘Tea would keep you awake; it might keep you awake.’

‘Nothing would keep me awake,’ with a faint smile.

‘Give Marquis that.’

He did so, and held his tongue; and presently, when she was sleeping like a dormouse, within the folds of her shawl, he set to work to attend to his own requirements. He ate diligently of pork, of bread and cheese, and drank well of the cider. He had plenty of work before him, and could not keep his strength by a diet of air, he concluded; and an appetite comes with eating. He passed his hand over his head several times, he must be sure to keep that organ steady, not to lose it, though there Queen Bab, from whom he had parted for good but two days since, this woman of a thousand dreams, of hopes and fears, of heartaches and bitternesses, lay curled in a wicker-chair slumbering, within two feet of him.

Her cracked, dry lips, her rough hair, her swollen features, her discoloured cheeks, her blue, dirty hands, disfigured by the incongruous purity of that pearl ring—God bless her, how well she slept—spoke of the evils she had undergone; please heaven she would be none the worse for that dreadful night. The glow of the hot coal was upon her, she had fought her way to shelter, the blood had been forced to circulate by the great exertion of the fight. She was no lady of cobweb, he had reckoned on her strength when he had ordered the retrograde movement to covert; but had he done the best for her, poor child? Unfortunately there was a great deal more which must be done; he replenished the

scuttle with coals, kneeled down and felt the brown tweed skirt to assure himself of its dryness, touched the hot cloth with his lips, and then went out of the room and fought his weary way back whence he had come.

The draughty kitchen of a demoralized farm is an odd place wherein to sleep continuously and well, but there Bab slept on hour after hour.

People came and went, they ate and drank, the storm lulled sufficiently to allow the fire in the grate to be kindled, the house was set in some sort of order, and still Bab slept, with the Marquis awake, suspicious, at her feet.

No one heeded her, nor were they interested in her, they did not hush their voices, the wicker-chair was no hallowed spot to these distraught people; they made no more of their guest than the blizzard had made of their comparative ruin.

In the early dusk Jack came back and found that Bab had been taken up-stairs; the farmer's wife had rigged up,

'A sofa-bed in a cupboard-place that was loo and warm, but small enough; the front-room was not habitable, and they were pushed for space, the gentleman must make shift in the parlour for to-night. The lady wasn't complaining, she was well enough, but dead asleep.'

So Jack went off with the farmer and his men, and lent a helping hand in picking sheep out of the snow; the poor scared creatures had gone to the hedges for shelter, and had been overwhelmed in the snowdrifts there.

Driven in later, partly by the gathering darkness, partly by great personal fatigue, Jack, thinking the time for a little rest had come to him, went off to his allotted quarters, and there found Bab in possession of the parlour, and as wide awake and as vigorous as the wind itself.

Through the livelong day he had been sick with anxiety, picturing every ill that overwrought, frozen, starved female flesh is heir to as hers; he had left her a huddled, dishevelled, tear-stained object, worn-out, dull-eyed, dead asleep; he found her kneeling before the fender, blowing with an unwieldy pair of bellows at a newly-lit fire; he found her fair, fresh, alert, not a penny the worse for her rough time. In sooth she was no lady of cobweb, but hardy, and perhaps as hard as the rosy-cheeked apples on the dish behind her. He did her wrong—hard? no, not that, for she turned clear, soft eyes to him.

‘At last,’ she said; ‘how long you have been out in the dark, Jack! You look such a wreck. Come here, to this chair, it’s for you, and sit down. The fire is sulky, it won’t blaze. No, don’t touch the bellows, it’s *my* fire, I got the peat and the wood myself.’

‘Why aren’t you in bed and asleep?’

And why, in the name of heaven, why was he not in the Three Towns of the west, out of reach of the sound of her voice? And why, in the name of reason and common-sense, should his spirits rise and his heart beat high? And why should the hubbub without, and the stuffy little parlour within, form a temporary paradise for one fool, at least, in his exile?

She knelt there puffing sparks and flame out of the wood, and talking over her shoulder to her companion, scouting the idea of the necessity of additional rest and sleep. Her hair was newly brushed and combed, and rolled up in a loose untidy coil round her head, she still wore the plaid shawl wrapt round her shoulders, her feet were encased in a roomy pair of her hostess’s prunella shoes.

He obeyed his orders. He leant back in his chair, and listened, and looked, and half wished that a mighty blast might come and blow the past and the future, all things, off the face of the earth, save Bab and him.

A victim of the storm turned into spatch-cock, and very good to eat, was brought to the pilgrims for their supper, this, with a jug of cider, with home-made bread and blue viney, made a regal feast, eaten to an accompaniment of Queen Bab's voice ; she was excited, radiant, so at home with Jack, so sure of his interest in her revelations, so certain of his approval, so anxious to look after his welfare and to do her share of the work, that the young man had to gather his energies, to pull himself together, and to tell himself that her very friendliness should rather quench his riotous feeling than stimulate it.

She sat opposite to him, her chin resting on her hands, her elbows on the table, her eyes shining, animated, and busy with him. He was not good to look upon, his crumpled collar and dirty shirt, his overgrowth of beard, his haggard face, and blood-shot eyes did not become him ; he was taciturn and silent, poor hard-worked Jack, she had to drag his news from him.

'And you got to the junction, did you? Wasn't it rather unnecessary? You say there was a gang of relief-men, I would have sent one of them.'

'I wanted to find out what Mr. Peel was doing, and whether there was any possibility of telegraphing.'

'I knew Stanhope would not be there ; he would think me mad for starting in bad weather, but, you see, I hoped the wind would drop. Did you telegraph?'

'No, the poles are down—no one knows exactly what damage has been done—I am afraid we shan't get away to-morrow, Bab.'

'I don't mind,' smiling, 'I am enjoying myself, and now you've brought me my dressing-bag I'm in clover. It is a genuine adventure—do you remember how hard I used to try for adventures, how I never could get lost in the woods, or upset from a boat, or kidnapped? Once my foot got jammed in the fork of the cedar, up you

came at once and pulled it free, and did me out of a sprained ankle, Jack.'

Jack said 'he was glad that one person in the west appreciated the blizzard, but that she had better keep the fact from the farmer's ears. For the loss to farmer and squire was untold, ungaugable.' He said, 'the cows in their stalls were embedded in snow which had blown down through dislodged thatch, covering crib and manger; that the cart-shed in the yard sheltered flocks of small birds, tom-tits, yellow-hammers, and robins that had come to his very feet for food, poor ruffled, dim-eyed starvelings.' He said 'they would hear of wrecks at sea and by land, such a blizzard spared neither life nor fortune.'

He sobered himself and his comrade alike by these observations. She rose and began, in an unprofessionable but ingratiating way, to collect the supper-things on a tray.

'I was like a child,' she faltered, biting her lip, 'enjoying my adventure, liking the newness. I forgot how dreadful it all was, and how it has kept you about here.' She paused, with the bread platter in her hand, beside him, and said with that dangerous frankness habitual to her, 'You see that you and I are all right, and a gang of men and snow-ploughs are clearing the drifts, and our fellow-passengers have all been taken on to Kidford Junction; they are quite safe there anyhow till the lines are cleared, so don't you think we may allow ourselves to be cheerful?'

'Aren't we fairly cheerful, Bab?'

'Yes, but don't you, too, find out how selfish I am, or how I think of no one but myself.'

'Too?' why did her voice break over that lamentable 'too'? Who had had the presumption to hector her?

'Bab,' he said, speaking fast, 'don't talk to me like that. Is it selfish to keep up your pluck after enduring

that fearful night as you endured it? Isn't it splendid of you to be here quite lively, and well, and putting the best face on a bad job? It is just like you to make the best of everything.'

She opened her eyes, he was contradictory.

'Ah, you always smooth me down the right way. No, sit where you are, I won't be helped, you've been working all day, and all the other people are tired out. I said I would clear away the *débris* and take it to the kitchen. You shall not stir. Shut your eyes and have a nap.'

Though the flayed eyelids were hot and weary he did not close them; men do not shut out the sight of royalty, they do not close their eyes when they find themselves on a short visit to court. Jack would not shut out the sight of Queen Bab as she turned parlour-work into a fine art, deftly stacking her tray, scooping up crumbs with the bread-knife, folding the table-cloth, and then bearing off the tray in her strong hands out of his sight, clattering her loose shoes on the flags.

A sweet fluty-toned cuckoo-clock struck eight o'clock, only eight. The fire blazed up crackling hot, a smell of peat and wood filled the room; he ached in every limb as he dragged his chair to the hearth, and without the wind howled and beat against the window.

She returned before long and dragged her chair alongside of his, putting her feet, in the prunella shoes, on the brass fender, hitching her shawl close round her, and resting her eyes on the fire; she was subdued and gentle.

'That poor man, Jack,—he is sitting with his face in his hands, he won't speak, his wife's crying, at least she has been crying, poor soul.'

'I told you that you were the one woman in the west who liked a blizzard for a change.'

'You know,' reproachfully, 'I don't like change, I hate it—Jack.'

'You change your friends.'

'Never, never,—you went away,—I did not *change*.'

He put his hand down to pat the Marquis at his feet, but the unsociable poodle showed his teeth and would tolerate no advances.

'Jack—India is so far away.'

'It is—but not too far, I think.'

'It is, it is *too* far, thousands of miles off, people forget every one at home. Absence doesn't make friendship firmer, and you never write to me—now. I wish you'd write sometimes.'

'I will write, Bab.'

'You spoilt me. Stanhope says it, they all say it. I am spoilt.' Her eyes were wet. 'I think——'

He interrupted her.

'I think,' he said, 'that, instead of sitting here abusing yourself, Bab, and toasting your pale face, you would be wiser to go to bed. You've no idea how much this sort of thing takes out of you, and what heaps of sleep you want to make up for such a night.'

She opened her lips to disparage his advice, but he went on,

'I'm dead tired myself. I shall be glad to turn in.'

Then she rose, her lips drooping; she was wide awake, she had much to say to him, and he was sick of her. In bygone times he would not have talked of what was *wisest*; by any artifice, by stratagem, by crook or hook he would have done his best to keep her in that chair beside him.

As she was going to be married he had done with her, he washed his hands of her—he, her old friend, her favourite friend, he banished her at half-past eight o'clock; he had nothing more to say to her.

'If you're so sleepy I will go,' she said, lamely, 'but—but it's the only time I've seen you for so long. You

needn't go all the way to India to change, Jack. I think you are rather changed now.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I am.'

'But you are not angry with me now? We are just the same as we used to be.'

'Except that you will be here in England, and I in the Far East.'

'When shall you come home again?'

'I don't know. Bab, there is something I want to tell you.' She stood up, and drew up her head, instinctively feeling the hoop of pearls on her finger. His hoarse, rough voice startled her. 'I must tell you. You'll wonder at me—God knows, I wonder at myself. A night or two ago I asked a woman to marry me. I asked Alethea to marry me.'

'Alethea—oh, *Alethea*; and——'

'And she would not have me. She said no.'

The cuckoo-clock called the half-hour, and Bab walked over slowly to the door.

'Alethea—Alethea,' she repeated; 'how odd, it *was* Alethea.'

CHAPTER XXV.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he's a-getting
The sooner will his race be run,
The nearer he's to setting.—HERRICK.

'It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.'

DAY broke calmly; beneath a mild sky the ravaged country lay at peace. Jack was not loth to leave his couch at cock-crow, for around his flock mattress, which was laid upon the floor, draughts had played brightly through the sleepless night.

At the earliest opportunity he arose, making a toilet

of want and discomfit, and wondering, as he did so, why a lack of barber should create, in a couple of days or so, such a ruffianly villain of aspect as a century of evil-living is incapable of achieving.

Though Jack was up with the lark, he found his host was out before him; the poor man stood stock still, paralyzed by the force of his feelings, amongst the ruins of his farmyard.

'Good-day,' said Jack, and then could have bitten his tongue out for the inappropriate greeting.

'Well, sir, the good-day's come too late for we;' he pointed with a sweeping gesture to the tragic vale of desolation around. 'I swear to you I shudden know this land of mine from Adam. The orchard's down as though 'twas mown with a scythe, a jungle of good apple-trees, with a stump of trunk here and there, the heads of 'em wrenched off as you'd wrench off a turnip-top. This sun, sir, takes the heart out of me; I could bear up in the roaring and the row, but this here seems most as though God A'mighty wasn't 'pon our sides, after all. Look at them drifts, the country is like a growed-out cripple, lumped with humps of snow, and underneath, sir, lies the rent and our meat. Tidden much us farmers have, and the most of it's under them dazzling sepulchres.'

The farmer cursed the white, glittering, transfiguring destruction around him; it deserved execration. Jack's mood lent itself readily to lamentations, and presently the pair went off to the meadow together, and began, in company with the shepherd and a couple of labourers, to dig out imprisoned live-stock from their 'dazzling sepulchres.' Many of the poor buried sheep and lambs were dead, but here and there they showed great tenacity of life; weak and drowsy lambs, after a dose of gin, cheered up and ran off bleating for their mothers. The shepherd and the couple of labourers talked as they

worked, and Jack thought, and the farmer groaned. The work was hard, it set the rescuers' blood rushing warm through their tingling veins. Though hands were cracked and bleeding, they did their duty and toiled on.

'I haven heard she zince Zinday,' said a man, when the clock on the church in the valley far away struck eight. 'Tez rale hungry wither, thease yer.'

'The maidens are bringing us out a bit of breakfast, sir,' said the host; 'but, perhaps, you'd rather go indoors and sit to your food.'

'Sitting to food' is, according to a certain standard, a luxury, but Jack did not avail himself of the proffered honour, for just then the 'maidens' came forth from the house laden with baskets, and with tin cans which steamed suggestively, and one of the twain had a cloak of many vile colours over her head, and she walked at such a pace over the ground as only one pair of ankles in Devonshire could accomplish.

Jack, with a foot on his idle spade, stood and watched her approach, telling himself that she was pure-hearted, white-souled, spotless as the snow she trod. Telling himself, too, that she could sting, and blind, and destroy as it had done, and knowing that lady of icicles and frost though Bab was, yet he loved her so well that he blessed fate, or Alethea, who had left him a lunatic at large, who had no just cause or impediment in the indulgence of his mania. He preferred picking out sheep from the snowdrifts to any form of amusement which could be proffered him; it did not tire him, and he was thankful to preserve the small mercy of freedom which he had been rash enough to jeopardize. How well Alethea had understood him; he was grateful for her common-sense, though her words had not been altogether gratifying.

'You want to marry *me*?' she had said, even a little

querulously ; and when he had assured her that such was his desire, she had not shown any symptoms of pleasure in his words, but had denied his suit fiercely. ' You want me so that I may be at hand when you wish to talk of Bab, to rave of Bab, to be weak and wild about Bab ? '

Then he had inquired whether she had heard Bab's name pass his lips of late.

' No,' Alethea had replied, ' you have said nothing, but you have had moods and broods, and I have known of whom you have sat and thought. Lonely, yes, you may be lonely, you are not the only person on earth who has to live on air.'

' I would try to make you happy,' he had said, gently.

' You would make me absolutely miserable,' she retorted. ' You forget my health, my one great interest, my health, the heat of India would finish it ; I should be some one to nurse, not some one to confide in. When my head ached you could not rave at me, I should break down, so I should be in the way, and no safety-valve when your heart overflowed about number one.'

' Alethea, you are talking rather at random.'

' I feel rather at random, you see. Hush, Jack, be patient, wait. You will find Queen Bab the Second some day, a new liege lady who neither knows of, nor believes in your broken heart, because of the neat patches upon its fragments which you have given *bonâ-fide* to her, for her very own.'

He had been chafed by Alethea's allusion to Queen Bab the Second, and there his wooing had ended ; the remainder of the interview had been stiff and unsocial, the parting emotional and disquieting ; but thank the propitious stars for his freedom, though it was of no more practical avail than that of the floating crow over his head, which flew as it listed but found no foot on the hard, cold ground.

Bab's content with her own achievement was infectious. When she had induced Jack to seat himself on the trunk of an elm, which had been blown down at a convenient angle hard by, she unpacked her basket, recommending the smoked ham, the fried potatoes, the toast, and the coffee, with an enthusiasm which was appetizing. While he ate his breakfast she stood before him, digging fitfully, with aimless bursts of vigour, at the shallow snow with his spade.

'You are looking none the worse, Bab.'

'I think I'm the better, Jack, I am as fresh as paint.'

'You are out very early.'

'I like to get up if there is anything to do. Have you got enough toast? Shall I go in and make you some more?'

'Bab, you are overwhelming me with honours.'

'Nonsense, I like making toast, it's a good excuse for getting all the fire.'

'But I couldn't eat any more.'

Her eyes were tired though they were alert and animated, the shawl was pinned tightly across her shoulders, swathing her head, arms, and falling over her hands. Behind her an odd unwieldy hedge, overlapped by tons and tons of powdered snow, formed a cold background.

'The storm is over, Jack,' she said, dropping the spade, and looking at the sky.

'I don't know that, the glass is still a bit jumpy.'

'It would be magnificent—it would be the most beautiful sight in the world, if one did not remember.'

'What—do—you—mean?'

She pointed, with a sweep of arm, around her. He could not see the landscape. He was heedless of the wonder of the transformed country, he did not see the tough, upstanding fir-tree with its crusted crown of victory, the prismatic colours aglow in the glittering

icles that hung from its burdened branches; he did not see the snow drawn, like a sheet, over sheltered tracks; or the snow rolled into dazzling mountains; or the snow streaking the hills afar off with white billows. He did not see the cattle browsing unhurt and peaceful on green pastures blown bare; or the trees laid low, up-torn, their shattered dignity utilized for hungry breakfast-tables. He saw none of these things.

She stood reflective, grave, talkative, and blotted everything out of his physical vision.

‘How the wind did shriek and yell. I was frightened to death as we struggled across the open. The snow blinded me; it cut, and hurt, and froze—that soft, innocent-looking snow. One can’t realize how such a wind can die away to nothing.’

‘Nature soon rights herself after a storm—sooner than we do, Bab; she turns over a new leaf with great ease. We storm in the dark, and smile by daylight,—when we get our snow laid. One can’t keep at storming-point for ever.’

‘How strange!’ she was shading her eyes with one hand, and gazing away to the horizon. ‘Other things are as frantic as the wind, and they die out.’

‘What is strange?’

‘Getting over it *so soon*. What is the good of a storm?’

‘No good, so far as I know, Bab. Our forefathers took it as punishment from Providence; we take it as kismet from America. It will take the land a long while to get trim and taut, and there are landmarks down, and “*goyles*” blocked up, and glens destroyed which will never be the same again. The land will answer its purpose and grow its crops, but to those who know it best, to those who know it well, it is—changed.’

‘They will clear the line to-day, Jack, and we shall go?’

The remark was interrogative, not triumphant,

‘No doubt. I left telegrams to Tregarvis, and to Combe, and to Woodbury, and to Peel; the station-master will send them off when the wires are set at work again. I’m going over to the junction as soon as this business is done, to see what news there may be from the outside world.’

‘And I’ll go with you.’

He smiled, nodded, and rose, holding out his hand for his spade. The men had finished their breakfasts and gone back to toil, and so must he. Though the basket was waiting to be carried to the farm, Bab stayed with the labourers. She was interested in the work; she kept walking from man to man, suggesting and congratulating, and driving off the sheep, so soon as they were liberated, to their pens. How filthy the poor beasts looked in contrast to their prison, how little any one cared for them save in the guise of mutton or £ s. d.

The blue chapped hands of the labourers went to Bab’s heart, this steady, long, laborious picking-out took hardihood and patience; daily bread was hard to earn and help was a substantial gift that day; but one of the quartette of toilers dug and delved in snow light as air, and rejoiced to earn his twelve-o’clock dinner thus by the sweat of his brow.

When noon was past, and Jack was preparing for his tramp along the line to the junction, he found that though the sky was serene, yet the barometer was not; neither fair nor foul weather can cast its habit as a snake casts its skin, and he looked doubtfully at Bab, who, with Marquis at her heels, stood without, in the yard, talking to an apple-cheeked damsel, as she awaited him.

‘Suppose it comes on rough again, Bab,’ he said, ‘it’s a difficult two miles there, and you have to get back, you know, as well as to get there.’

Her face fell. Out, out, out, how well he remembered

her cry ; out, out, out for the last time with him ; and—and because her face fell, and because she did not dispute the necessity to which he had alluded, therefore did the infatuated young man reconsider his first, and best thought concerning her.

‘We’ve got plenty of daylight after all, and the afternoons are long, and there are gangs of men along the line, and,’ getting out of the drawbacks with handy conjunctions, ‘the course is fairly clear. I don’t suppose there’s much risk of more snow.’

‘Then can I come?’

‘Why—yes ; but I wouldn’t take the poodle,’ he had consideration but no love for the unfriendly Marquis ; ‘it’s bitterly cold out of the sun.’

‘It will be a lovely walk,’ she said, blithely, leading the way along the cleared path betwixt the rails.

‘Yes,’ and he wished it well over.

She was ahead of him walking along at a quick vigorous pace, the strong crisp air set the blood tingling in her red cheeks, her spirits were high and she talked constantly as she led Jack through the white world.

Was all this grinding jubilation merely the outcome of anticipation ? Did she sparkle at the expectation of a word from Mr. Peel ?

The icicles sparkled, but they, poor beauties, had no warm expectations, they glittered in the joy of a most precarious present.

‘If there is no news from Tregarvis,’ said Jack, irrelevantly, ‘you will have had this long walk for nothing.’

‘I like the walk,’ she faltered, looking round inquiringly at the speaker, the manner, not alone the matter of his abrupt remark puzzling her.

‘I hope you won’t be disappointed—that is all.’

To rejoice with those who do rejoice is, occasionally, a duty beyond mortal capacity.

'I don't think there can be any news of Stanhope,' she said, 'as yet.'

'They hoped to get the line reopened to-day.'

'As soon as it is open, Jack, I will go home, straight home.'

'Why?'

'I would rather go home.'

Had she annoyed Jack? He was dead silent. No, no, he was thinking, thinking of Alethea. Dull Alethea, who talked of her hay-fever all the summer, and of influenza all the winter—of course, he was depressed by Alethea. Bab had no longer to account for Jack's depression. Poor Jack! She sighed, and the sigh was audible, for in this white world all footsteps were muffled, the spades of the men whom they passed at this moment worked mum in the powdered snow.

'What is the matter, Bab? Are you tired?'

'No, I was thinking of—Alethea.'

'Oh!'

Now that Bab had taken to thought instead of speech, the silence grew oppressive. The sun was hidden by a passing cloud, the air was sharp with cold, and the walk was long.

Jack half understood the drift of Bab's remark, and set himself to reassure his companion by trampling his own personal past, present, and future somewhere out of sight in the snow, and giving her no cause to think of Alethea.

No shadow of his should ever fall across her dear life. Shadows must come, she was transparent as a child, and he knew that they had already touched her, though but transiently. The clouds were none of his, and not through him had they fallen on her. Now that he had found it easy to quench her spirits, he did not grudge them to her.

But many a corner of the western world was dark

with the shadows of the storm just then, and when the pedestrians, at a curve of the line, found themselves in sight of the junction, their destination, they came upon a group of agitated, loud-voiced country people who were standing together before the door of a small cottage, which lay close beside the railway.

It seemed as though the snow had made a target of the little hut, for it had drifted up to its thatched eaves, and wreathed itself round the chimney.

A ladder had been stacked against the little place, and a window had been dug clear of snow; the men were digging about it at this moment, and one of their number was opening the lattice from without; then he clambered through the narrow casement into the house, and as he did so the voices ceased in a hush of expectation.

'There is something wrong,' said Bab, who, though within sight of Kidford, had yet drawn up and was watching the cottagers. 'Come down, Jack, we will find out what it is.'

No wiseacre said that the sky was overcasting and the wind rising. No one remarked that 'to find out what it was' did no good to any one. There was nobody at hand who would not risk the chance of being eternally blizzarded, rather than say Bab 'nay' at this juncture of his feelings.

So the wayfarers wasted their time by descending the embankment, scaling the palings, and going towards, rather than sensibly avoiding, a 'something which was wrong.'

They found the cottage tenantless, save for a dog which had emerged from the window. It seemed that the owner of the house, 'a widow-woman up in years,' had gone to market upon the morning of the storm. She had called for help at a cottage on her homeward way, help which had been given her. A neighbour had seen her safely to within fifty yards of her own door,

but even so close to shelter, in the snow and wind she had missed her way ; she had never reached home.

The neighbours had come out as a search-gang on a dreary, hopeless track ; for to lose the road on such a night meant to lose life itself. The cottage was empty except for the woman's dog, and all around its walls the snowdrifts were high as the hedges beyond. Amongst this multitude of possible graves, where should they look ? how should they look ? The thaw alone could be trusted to discover lost lives ; the thaw alone could lay the secrets of the blizzard bare. And to the thaw the people would have left the search, had not the dog, so soon as he was set upon the ground, begun, with its nose upon the snow, to seek some trail, as though where reason taught despair, instinct was hopeful. Round and round in wide and ever-widening circles the little mongrel pushed his way, increasing speed and excitement as the men encouraged him in his efforts.

'We must go on, Bab,' Jack said, persuasively ; 'I will get some men in Kidford to come out and help the search.'

'Watch the dog, Jack ; wait a little while. Look, he's going out through the gate down the lane ; there he goes into the next field.'

They stood, expectantly, watching, and then a woman cried out, 'Dü 'ee follow him, for she did sim thickee dug 'ed vound summat.' The group of waiting people, slowly and half-reluctantly, it seemed, passed on into the neighbouring meadow and gathered round the frantic dog, which, with nose and paws at work, was digging in a shallow drift, whining and howling as he scattered the snow to right and left of him.

Then the men fell to with spade and shovel, and dug the drift bare, while Bab stood like a rock, holding her breath, and watched them,—watched them uncover the dead ; watched them strip the poor dead woman of her

soft, cold shroud, looked down upon her where she lay, with her basket full of her last marketings, her bit of bacon, her candles, and her reel of thread, beside her. The people were very quiet. It was a sobering sight to see, and little was said that was articulate.

‘Bab, we must go on; the wind has risen, and it is beginning to snow, we must not wait here any longer.’

She went then, walking very quickly and stumbling as she walked; tears stood hot and thick in her eyes.

‘Isn’t it dreadful?’ she said, wringing her hands. ‘Isn’t it cruel, Jack? She was so near home.’

‘She took the gate of the field for her own gate, she must have wandered round and round those drifts looking for the cottage, poor soul. It couldn’t have lasted long, Bab; the cold was so great.’

But Bab was weeping over the first dead face which she had seen, shuddering and crying, turning to Jack for comfort; for, with nerves shaken by the storm and a heart wrung by the nearness of death, she wanted strength, and that not physical. Jack had British reserve in plenty, but he was ready to relinquish a cherished characteristic, he was ready to rake out the bottom of his soul to comfort his comrade, and he knew no landmark of comfort but the gospel of consolation.

He said that the woman was old, that she was lonely, that instead of missing her way home perhaps she had found, and had been glad to find it. He said the sort of things which Bab had heard in the drowsy atmosphere of Coombe church, superfluous, unnecessary truths, which she had left there in the pew all the year round. He talked of his God as though he was not ashamed of Him, of heaven as though he did not doubt its existence, of life as though it was but the beginning of the end.

And Bab felt better, and struggled back to decent composure, though she was tear-stained and pale enough to worry her over-anxious protector, who hurried her

into the station and on to the platform, alongside of which a train, drawn by a couple of engines, was just about to draw up.

Station-master, officials, porters, and people had gathered to cheer and welcome the incomer, for it brought the first communication from the outside world which the prisoners at Kidford had had for two days and three nights.

Jack and Bab hung back from the excited crowd, watching the congratulations and greetings, little anticipating the great surprise which awaited them ; little guessing that Bab was to have a share in the merry meetings, at which they onlooked with a haze of snow that chilled the exultation of the travellers in their eyes.

Bab had brought her unfailing good-luck with her through the blizzard, for amongst the jubilant arrivals was Mr. Peel himself. Stanhope, triumphant, excited, pleased, self-congratulatory, sprung from a carriage ; for once in his life, forgetting appearance, he caught Bab's hands in his and kissed her on both cheeks.

CHAPTER XXVI.

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth I knew not where :
I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where.

Long, long afterwards in an oak
I found the arrow still unbroke :
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.

LONGFELLOW.

‘ No one is a good judge in his own cause.’

THE walk and its most vile conclusion was over, Jack had tramped back to the farm through the snow and wind alone. He had taken an awakened dread, and a

smarting, hot, rancorous anger to keep him company, and yet he had nothing to complain about, he had been treated considerately. Mr. Peel had thanked him with gracious warmth for his kindness to Bab, and Bab had thanked him earnestly too, and—he had seen the last of her, against her wishes she had been taken straight off to Tregarvis.

Jack had seen her desires over-ridden, he had heard her beg to be allowed to go home, straight home, and he had found how easily her requests could be calmly and quietly ignored. He had seen why Bab had found her master, and it was not likely he would be altogether just to that master.

He had stood a quiet third and listened to a dialogue which had driven him frantic; and yet Mr. Peel had practical common-sense on his side, he did right to take his betrothed off with him.

‘Don’t argue, Bab; for heaven’s sake get into the carriage out of the cold. You can’t go home, the line to Tipton isn’t open. It’s only an hour’s run to Tregarvis, and I’ve sent a wire to say we are coming.’

‘But my bag and Marquis are at the farm, Stanhope,’ Bab had persisted, ‘and I’m rather tired.’

‘Then ploughing a couple of miles through snow isn’t the way to get fresh. I came worrying down here as soon as I got Holland’s wire, and they are shunting the engines now—we shall get off again in no time. What a precious lucky thing it was you came over here. Get in, get in. By Jove, you aren’t looking any the better for being blizzarded; your skin is like a torn muffin—and what a shocking hat!’ He tweaked it forward as he spoke, and addressed Jack, who was looking surly and forbidding, ‘Bab don’t care a straw what she looks like.’

Jack was unresponsive, and then Mr. Peel had again urged Bab to get into the carriage and sit down.

'Holland would see after the dog and the dressing-bag. Her trunks were in the cloak-room, did she say? Then that was settled. Bab must get in at once, she was looking done up, he had rugs for two.'

The wonder of it was that Bab did follow her conductor, and did get into the carriage as she had been directed to do, her lover talking all the time of his adventures. He had been snowed up in his quarters, he had not worried about Bab; he had not dreamed but that a pair of sensible women, such as the two Mary Fenwicks, would have stayed at home in bad weather, as he had done. Worried? Rather not, he had had enough to do to keep warm.

He went off presently to get out the luggage, still talking hard to Jack who accompanied him, and leaving Bab, wrapped in his rug, shut up in her carriage.

When Jack came out some minutes later from the telegraph-office upon the platform, he found Bab at the window which she had opened, and she beckoned to him.

'Jack, look how dark it is getting. Don't go back to the farm. Come on with us in this train.'

'But it's going the wrong way for me, Bab, I take the other direction.'

Of course, she had forgotten, Jack's answer had posed her for a moment, then she pointed down the platform to the open country, where yellowish clouds were driving up thick from the north.

'Then go back now, don't wait, hurry, Jack, it may blow again. Here, here,' she was shaking the contents of her purse into his hand, 'give this to the people somehow; tell them why I went, and thank them very much. Now go, please, go, while the snow lasts my nerve has gone, Jack—hurry back.'

Loyal to her lightest wish he had obeyed, pooh-poohing her fears.

'There is a cutting all the way, Bab, and gangs of navvies on the line, nothing to fear. But—good-bye.'

He would not allow himself the luxury of her anxiety, and when Stanhope came back to the carriage Bab was alone.

'Gone, has he? Stupid sort of chap he is, too, he holds his tongue too much for me. If a man has a decent mind, why shouldn't he speak it? But he don't cotton to me, I took the wind out of his sail, eh, Bab? You have got blown about, that's a terrible hat, my dear. Holland made me wire to Combe for your maid, he said you'd want looking after, for you had come across a bogie-sight just now. He must have been a fool to let you out, the country is full of them. Get back in that corner, there, there, back to the horses. Why will a woman go anywhere rather than where she is asked to go? What's the matter, darling? Don't get hysterical, for heaven's sake.'

To some people tears mean temper, nerves, anything rather than suffering. The word hysterical is offensive to female ears, and as bracing as the orthodox dash of iced water. Bab brushed the cuff of her coat nervously across her eyes.

'There, that is better. Come, that's right, you are one of the sensible sort, I never saw you make a fool of yourself. There, kiss me,—no doubt you had a baddish time boxed up with him,—shocking bad luck the whole thing.'

Mr. Peel's form of consolation seemed good in his eyes, and it was effective. Bab dried her swollen eyes and steadied her rough lips. He was not an ardent lover, but as she had said she would marry him, he concluded that she loved him. Sometimes he was a little sick of being kept at arm's length, he did not want any nonsense, but he wanted to be made much of, to be manifestly a hero; self-assured though he was,

occasionally his vanity was pricked by her want of appreciation.

He had told his people that,

‘She was good-looking, well-groomed, nice-tempered, and a fellow couldn’t expect everything. Nothing in her,’ he candidly added, ‘no sentimental rot. Nothing spoony. By Jove, she is as hard as bricks.’

Hard, indeed, she must be, for his comely face, exceptional figure, and peerless tailor had not softened her at all.

Even now, when he, with his tendency to rheumatism and his knack of catching cold, had exerted himself in this beastly blizzard to fetch her to civilization, her gratitude did not overflow, but she sat and wept herself hideous—most hideous—over some miserable old woman who had been lost in a snowdrift.

‘If you once begin to make yourself wretched about outsiders, my dear,’ he remarked, ‘you might cry from now till nineteen hundred, there is no end to it. Dry handkerchiefs in dozens over the daily obituaries in the morning-papers. But it wasn’t the old woman who gave you the blues, you are out of form altogether and off colour, you want a pint of phiz and a jolly evening.’

Miss Fenwick’s visit to Tregarvis went off smoothly, satisfactorily. She stayed there for a week, and won such good opinions as a person of her prospects was, under the circumstances, fairly confident of winning.

She was an unexacting, easily amused heiress. Stanhope was lucky to annex a young person who was so energetic in exploring the white land without, that she was no *gêne* to her entertainers within; the weather kept on negotiable terms with mankind, and Bab walked, and drove, and rode far and wide.

If Mrs. Peel found Miss Fenwick’s mind a vacuum on housewifery, and lamented the void in private, her father-in-law-elect blazed out in her defence.

'She has got a pair of feet that are some good to her, and eyes of her own. I'd take her opinion before Stanhope's ; she'll improve the place, though we shan't live to see it. She may not care for nonsense, and man-stalking like our girls, but she takes more interest in Tregarvis than they do, and knows more about it in a week than they do, and so I tell you.'

Stanhope took credit for Bab's points as though he were creator as well as proprietor of his betrothed ; if it was satisfactory to remember that she had both will and power to improve the place, it was not so gratifying to hear that she was no man-stalker,—man is a unique animal, he does not object to being chased.

The young man did not want an original Mrs. Stanhope Peel, originality was a most angular domestic vice. Perhaps Bab was inclined to be original, for she treated his father precisely as she treated him, she was civil, genial, friendly to them both. For the sake of his sisters, who understood these matters, he wished that Bab would twitter, and blush over attentions which he elaborated in her cause.

His youngest sister, a pert damsel of sixteen, chaffed her brother at his failure with great freedom. 'Twit, twit,' she sang at him over the banisters, with the servants about and Bab herself in earshot.

'Twit, twit, she don't care for you,
Fact she thinks you are a bore.
Twit, twit, you won't see her any more !'

He only laughed at the attack, and Bab smiled too, and then they started for their last long ride in his native county.

She was in a pleasant mood, more responsive than usual, merrier too, and her figure was so good that it looked best when least disguised, and her habit fitted her absolutely. Then the exercise warmed her cheeks, kindled her eyes ; he was pleased with his bargain, she

did not chill him upon this sunny afternoon. They rode as the crow flies, making for the crest of a hill; Bab's thoughts were trained to rise to her tongue and to escape thence, troubling her no more; when Stanhope was pointing out to her beauties and landmarks of his domain, she leaned forward and patted her horse's neck, her eyes betwixt his ears, not on the ridges of barren moorland to which her attention was directed, and broke in upon her guide's explanations irrelevantly, asking an awkward question.

'Stanhope, have you ever been really fond of any one?'

This was exasperating, even alarming from the woman who a fortnight hence would be his wife; he screwed the points of his moustache up sharp as bayonets, and looked at her frank, hazel eyes.

'Bab!'

'I mean *before* me,' hastily, as though to avoid protestations.

'Oh, of course—well—don't you know, I'm like other fellows.'

'You have—been——?'

'Yes—yes.'

'Many times?'

'I'm blessed if I know how many. I suppose I've thought myself really gone about a dozen times.'

'What's the difference,' earnestly, 'between "*really gone*," and fancying it?'

This was a puzzling question, but a happy thought extricated him from his difficulties.

'The other dozen were fancies; you, Bab, you are the real thing.'

She laughed in his face.

'Bab, I'm not chaffing.'

'No,' growing grave again, 'but you do not make it clear by saying that, though it was a pretty thing to say. Stanhope, I'm not offended, but I know you are

not so very, very, very fond of me. It is better as it is, far better ; you are quite fond enough, and I will try, I will try—I have thought about it a good deal lately—I will try to make you happy, though,' she put her hand on her side and drew a long breath, ' though I am cold—rather cold.'

' You weren't likely to thaw in the blizzard, Bab, you got an extra chill. Here's a good stretch for a canter, come on.'

In the 'fine fluent motion' over the turf, Mr. Peel's mind was busy, even he could see that a shadow lay across Bab's transparent thoughts.

It was a precious good thing, he told himself, that Holland was out of the country, and that the wedding was so near at hand. Holland had been tame cat at Combe since Bab was in long clothes ; how like a woman it would be, should she find out that this old hanger-on was a necessary adjunct to her happiness, so soon as he had taken his passage for the East, and she had fixed her fate.

To have taken advantage of the blizzard to make the running was a blackguard thing to have done ; had Holland done it ? Before the canter settled to a trot, Mr. Peel was hot and angry, and, for the sake of justice, set upon showing Jack in his true colours.

' Heard from Holland since he went, Bab ?'

' Yes, he wrote when he sent my dressing-bag and Marquis.'

' What on earth had he got to write about ?'

' He said good-bye.'

' He said half-a-dozen good-byes that day at the station.'

' What do you mean ?'

' Just what I say, and more than that into the bargain. I mean it is time he gave you up. You chucked him for me, and he's got to swallow that. It

is awfully poor form of a chap to go sneaking after you now-a-days, and I'd let him know it if he was going to stay in this country.'

He was working himself to a red heat; you need not be very fond of a woman, and yet you can be very angry with, and very jealous of her.

Mr. Peel's dignity was ten times greater than himself, and he was not going to have it so much as pared off at the edges.

'You have no right to talk of him like that.'

'I am just the one person who has the right to talk of him as I choose, and I choose that no man should make love—yes, *love*—to you.'

'I can't think why you are talking to me like this. Did Jack, poor Jack, arrange the blizzard?'

'No, but he took you out in it, and let you see all sorts of bogies. Yes, you may be strong in the head and a good goer, but you ain't anything after all but a girl—and they are all alike. You had been crying, and Jack, "*poor Jack*," as you call him, had had a good time of it drying the tears.'

Bab's hand which held the reins shook with a gust of anger, her eyes rebuked Mr. Peel, but she held her tongue. She was not used to violent emotion, and when her pulses steadied she felt sick at heart and spiritless.

Of course Stanhope would, naturally, dislike the idea of any man making love to her, (her mind was just and reasonable,) only Jack had not done so, would never do so again, and she was tired of her dull thoughts, tired of herself. Stanhope's grotesque suggestion that she had got an extra chill in the gale and snow might be the truth.

She must not cry again, there was no one now who could dry tears; and Stanhope went fuming on, and she said no word to defend her old friend, he needed no defence.

For the greater part of this last evening she talked wedding-business with the girls and their mother; for the Peels *en masse* were coming to Combe for the ceremony, and there were many arrangements to be made and much to discuss.

Then the bride-elect was taken to the billiard-room whither her lover had strayed, and, one by one, the family, who knew their duty, left them; left them to the *tête-à-tête* of which they got so considerable a portion.

Mr. Peel was knocking the balls about: Bab looked at him critically from his smart head to his immaculate boots, he was a faultless little man, there was no flaw about him at all. He put his careless arm round her waist and held her close, and kissed her warmly.

'Come, kiss me and be friends,' he said. 'I got a bit angry, don't you see. I shouldn't have let out if I hadn't cared, don't you see. I'm an easy-going chap as a rule, ain't I?'

His justification was righteous, it was evident she bore him no sort of malice, though she cut short the soft scene by taking a cue and playing him a long, successful game—for gloves, not love.

CHAPTER XXVII.

If there ever comes a grief to me,
I cry my cry in silence, and have done.

Guinevere.

'Sweet flowers are slow, but weeds make haste.'

UPON the following day the lovers parted, having travelled together as far as Exeter, from whence Mr. Peel set out for a farewell visit of bachelor freedom to London, while Bab was homeward bound.

The two remaining weeks of Bab's maidenhood must be ground out amongst the toil and moil of plans, good-

byes, clothes, notes, and acquaintances for a bride-elect is fussed, and flurried, and harrowed out of girlhood ; therefore laying up for herself a retributionary reaction to be faced during the early months of matrimony.

Though the bridegroom is a mere cypher at his wedding ceremony, yet is not his the better part ? He is no worn-out, jaded cynosure of eyes, uprooted whole, in a bewildering turmoil, from every dear association of life.

Bab's welcome home was very warm, as that momentous twenty-minutes ceremonial approached, during which the girl's fate was to be eternally riveted, her people grew very tender of her feelings, very greedy of her presence.

The blizzard had not broken in full violence upon the Combe side of the county, though the telegraphic communication had stopped, so that the Fenwicks had not realized the extent of the storm until it was at an end, and until Jack's reassuring telegram told them all was well, yet they treated Bab as though they had received her back from the jaws of death.

The telegraphic, disconnected, galloping letters she had written from Tregarvis had told them little. She must have suffered cruelly in that terrible night of disaster ; surely she must have suffered some discomfiture in that ill-fated farm with Jack.

Those who knew something of the tinder-box propensities of such a situation, could not but be curious to learn how those long hours had passed ; but Bab came home red as a rose, energetic, blithe, restless, but uncommunicative. She remarked 'that the storm had been perfectly horrible,' and she told facts in answer to questions, but within ten minutes of her arrival at Combe she had gone off to the stables, and for a prowling with her father amongst the animals, leaving Mrs. Fenwick unsatisfied, inquisitive, anxious.

Driven in, presently, by the waning light, she camped out in the unsociable hall, and proceeded to unpack the

cases and parcels which had come for her during her absence ; there were many of them and their contents were interesting, her father and mother stood by watching her, and helping her with hammer and chisel, occasionally.

‘Mother,’ said the bride-elect, fingering an umbrella from which a pencil emerged with embarrassing readiness ; a silver shoe-horn, a fish-slice, and a mustard-pot lay on her lap ; on the carpet at her feet stood a tall lamp and a brass coal-box, ‘Mrs. Peel wanted to know such a lot of particulars about the wedding, and I’d forgotten them all. It is to be very gay, I said, I know it’s to be *very gay*.’

‘It’s to be imposing,’ said her father, ‘gay’s a wrong word.’

It is indeed, for if a match is the outcome of calculated effort, then it is a triumphant ceremony ; again, if the match be but a means of living, it is too serious a matter for gaiety ; and if it be a love-match, then it is fraught with every sort of beauty but that of mirth.

‘I tell you what,’ said Bab, looking at her mother, ‘I should like to feed every one.’

Captain Fenwick was on his knees, his head in a nail-studded deal box.

‘There spoke the voice of Stanhope, Bab, he shall be fed.’

‘Bab isn’t talking of him, she means——’ hesitating.

‘I mean everybody, all the people about, the poor people who want feeding, and the others, the tenants who don’t.’

Captain Fenwick took his head out of the straw and laughed at Mary.

‘My dear Bab, did you think your mother would let such a chance of entertaining pass ? Every ragamuffin within hail will be fed on your wedding-day ; they are all invited and they are coming. I found the lists, she was ashamed to show them. She always had an innocent knack of drawing big cheques, because I never dare mention the word cheque to her, that was the reason why.’

'Bab, I did talk it over with you,' said Mrs. Fenwick, very gently. 'Of course I settled nothing without asking you.'

'I'm the last person you need ask, I forget everything. I don't remember those sort of things. What have you got there, father? Let me see.'

This spoiled child of fortune did not so much as rise, she only stretched out her hand for the jewel-case which her father had unpacked from its enfolding papers.

'Here you are, Bab, and a note too; people are pelting you with soft words and hard presents from every quarter—all this blarney will turn that small head of yours.'

Bab uttered an inarticulate murmur of admiration as she unclosed the case; within it, against a background of turquoise velvet glittered a diamond dove, a heart of pearls hung from his jewelled beak.

'How pretty, how sweet, what a charming thing!'

'Who sent it, Bab?'

She opened the accompanying note, read it, and handed it in silence to her mother.

'MY DEAR BAB, (it ran,)

'I am sending this peaceful person, glittering bright (his only unruly possession out of harm's way, for is it not in his mouth?) with my love. May it be an emblem of future paths of peace and brightness.

'Yours as always,

'ALETHEA CORNWALLIS YOUNG.'

'She's chaffing you, Miss Fenwick,' said her father, reading and smiling; 'that little woman has a back-door sort of way with her tongue and her pen; she's chaffing you, Bab.'

If the writer had meant to insinuate that the bridegroom's heart was in his mouth, it was concluded that Bab did not care a straw where it was located, so long as it did not get in her way. Both the bride-elect's com-

panions saw that she did not see the fun, that she thought such chaff quite gloomy, for she put the dove back in his velvet trappings, snapped-to the case with a click, and sat there in silence, her eyes upon the dusky outline of the window above her,

‘All the spirit deeply dawning in the dark of hazel eyes.’

‘This dove is too much for you,’ said Godfray, putting his hand on her shoulder ; ‘you can’t live up to him, eh, dear ? I like this picture of Jack’s amazingly.’

‘It was such a nice idea,’ added Mrs. Fenwick.

The nice idea was a water-colour sketch of Combe, painted in early dawn ; a faithful likeness of the grey stone house with its background of wooded hill ; a picture of rich colouring and great beauty.

‘Very nice,’ said the owner of the sketch, ‘but,’ getting up, ‘I think I will go to my room now and get off my things, I have had my hat on since nine o’clock this morning.’

She went off unthwarted, crossing the hall slowly and wandering leisurely up the staircase, stopping midway to dip her hand into the high delf jar of pot-pourri which stood in a recess, stopping to look at a Fenwick ancestor overhead ; stopping to wonder whether a picture would suffice to solace her when she was out of reach of her beloved Combe. Nay, if she could not have the real thing, a shadow of it would not do at all ; she would turn the likeness of the desire to the wall and do without it.

Of what avail were muscle and sinew if the will was weak ?

‘Fancy,’ she said, weighing that word in her mind, ‘fancy, what a poor, miserable faculty one has for fancy. I always knew it was fancy.’

Mrs. Fenwick left her husband with the hay and sawdust, with the things of beauty around him, and followed the daughter of the house to her green and white chamber.

That energetic person was not brooding, she was at her writing-table writing notes of thanks. Mrs. Fenwick was not a demonstrative woman, but she put her arms round the girl's neck and kissed her tenderly.

'My darling, my own,' she said, with a foolish gush of feeling over dangers past and gone, 'thank God I have you here again, safe, and well, and happy, dear Bab, dearest Bab. You have had a dreadful time, you have had a hard time, I see it in your face.'

Then Bab leaned her head against her mother's shoulder, and told her tale with shuddering lips and changing colour, but told no word such as the hearer had prepared herself to hear. Not a word of Jack, only a story of the storm, of the cold night, of the fight to shelter, and of the dead woman in the snow, and of death, pitiable, omnipotent death. Bab's voice vibrated as she spoke, and Mrs. Fenwick listened, holding her daughter's hands in hers.

Half a century of living, even of happy living, takes much from the sharpness of death. Familiarity breeds, if not contempt, at least some degree of indifference. Death to the hearer was no new sight, she had no horror of the end, and she listened, waiting to hear more, to hear of the living with the dead, but she waited in vain.

Bab had never shown any faculty for reserve. Had there been more to tell she would have told it. Could not her mother measure her capacities? What is bred in the bone will out in the flesh, and had not the elder Mary Fenwick a taste for keeping her own counsel?

Bab's confidences were disappointing, and they were cut short by the advent of Becket. Mrs. Fenwick saw her daughter no more alone that day, and upon the following morning she ordered the cart round directly after breakfast.

'I want to go into Tipton,' she said, 'I've some things to do.'

'Why are you going so early?' her mother asked, 'if you'd give me time to think and to consult Becket, I would write you a list of commissions a yard long.'

'Then I won't give you time. It's a nice fresh morning, I want to be off, and I must go on to Woodbury and thank Althea for my dove.'

Mrs. Fenwick made no more objections to the start, but went out into the porch with the girl to see the start. She found Captain Fenwick on the drive standing at Brunette's head, and soothing her impatience with sugar and patting.

'Bab,' said he, combatively, 'I'm going to get rid of this steed of yours. You must not risk your neck any more, such high spirits as Brunette's are risky. This is the last time you will drive her, make the most of it.'

His daughter shook her head, and then her face fell.

'Brunette and Stanhope wouldn't get on much,' she said, 'but I love her, we suit each other down to the ground.'

Miss Fenwick was in the cart now, and Brunette was mad to be off.

'Charming mare,' said the master of the house, derisively. 'Phil is hanging on by his eyebrows and you can't spare a little finger to lift your rug. Keep her well in hand. Don't woolgather on the way. Good-bye. Good-bye.'

The master of the house stood and watched the cart out of sight, then he turned to his wife.

'They are a splendid pair,' he said, proudly, 'they suit each other to a T, as the child said.'

But Mary caught her breath, not answering, then he looked at her and saw the tears in her eyes.

'To bare, to rear, to love, and then—to lose,' she said, under her breath, in answer to his wondering look.

'But, Mary, she is coming straight back after the

honeymoon. This won't do, you can't tie that daughter of yours to your apron-string and run her in a leash with your husband.'

He was teasing her, but without any bitterness in his banter.

Her smile was not successful.

'I wish,' she spoke out suddenly, passionately—'I wish she had never seen that man, Godfray, I wish she would never marry, she is happy, quite happy as she is.'

'What is it, Mary? Be reasonable. You don't want Bab to grow into an oddity, you don't want her to grow into a manly, tough, strong-minded old maid? Peel is a steady fellow and she chose him, selected him herself. She will have her ups and downs, no doubt, to keep her commonplace; if she went her own way she'd get a bit eccentric in time, I fancy. Bless you, she'll be quite happy. She's not like you, Mary, she's one of us, and takes things uncommonly easy. Jack must find another wife, there is plenty of choice even in India, he'll get one before long, I know you are hankering after him, I have myself. He played his cards clumsily or she would have squared it with him, I verily believe, but it's no use crying over spilt milk. We must take things as they are and make the best of them.'

Godfray was a lazy, easy-going man who liked his thinking mostly done for him, but he could, on occasion, take command of both his will and his wife, with authority which was wise as it was undisputed.

Mary was no woman of whims; when she laughed half-heartedly, and excused herself by saying, 'That her head ached, that she had had a bad night and dreamed of horrors, that she was tired and out of spirits,' he did not count it waste of time to devote this sunshiny morning to consoling her, even for an imaginary trouble.

He knew her face so well, he had learned through

the pleasant years to perfect his kindly art, he could pierce her reserve and heal the hurts which it was natural to her to have hidden from him.

So if Mary was foolhardy enough to chose imaginary sorrow for a playfellow she had some reason for the choice. He took her off with him into the breezy, high-lying garden where the spring flowers, none the worse for their extra chill, were bursting, where the noisy birds were singing a requiem for the dead winter, and tried to soothe her back to her usual serenity.

The hot sun found its way to the last white streaks of snow, which lay below the hedges and in the goyles and glades, melting the frozen drifts tear by tear. The hot sun was seductive and so was Godfray's company, so the idle mistress of the house loitered without all the morning long, talking of Bab, of Bab's childhood, of her tricks of baby talk, of her many escapades, of her strength and courage, of her patience (not in tribulation, but with fishing-rod, and racket, and club), of her beauty, too, and frankness. Godfray tried to talk of the garden, which was all planted with a view to the wedding, but Mary was full of no one, of nothing but her daughter.

Here were the empty rabbit-hutches, here her small plot of garden; did Godfray remember how Bab had climbed the deodara there for a bird's-nest, and had fallen off a high branch, and how Mary had found her lying on the ground, stunned, with her face pricked and bleeding?

'I must have been dreaming of that,' said Mrs. Fenwick, with an evident satisfaction in her own suggestion. 'I dreamt of it last night, and I had not thought of it for years. Shall we walk down to the lodge and meet the cart, Godfray? She ought to be back soon, it is nearly lunch-time.'

'Perhaps she will lunch at Woodbury.'

'No,' quickly, conclusively, 'she will come home.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Is it so true that second thoughts are best ?
Not first, and third which are a riper first ?
Too ripe, too late : they come too late for use.—TENNYSON.

‘The future comes not from *before* to meet us, but streams up from *behind* over our heads.’

THROUGH the pleasant lanes the cart spun apace on its way to Woodbury. The hand which directed Brunette’s course was accomplished and inexorable ; its owner sat square, straight on the high box-seat, looking before her with serious eyes.

Swift gusts of gorse-scented breeze rushed softly by, the keen sun shone upon her, to her the birds sang boldly of their throbbing joys. Spring stirred the heart of Nature, and the heart of Nature in her turn touched the hearts of men.

The last days of Bab’s maidenhood were galloping past, the busy, beautiful, short days of life. Filled full of delights were they ; in truth, they had been just a little overfull, for when a grain of sadness had, all unawares, mingled with her happiness, it had overflowed and run to waste.

A tyrannous thought haunted Bab, she could not get rid of a weight on her memory. That poor, dead woman had tried to struggle home. Had she prayed and striven, and yet stumbled and died ? It tore Bab’s heart to think of her.

This arbitrary thought tinged the spring day with melancholy. Bab’s mind was too frank to altogether deceive its owner, it assured her that she had no right to trifle with ‘the blues.’ Such blues were cowardly ; was she suspicious of a chosen track, scared by her own shadow ? Bab worshipped at the shrine of the great god Pluck, and she had no tenderness for her heavy heart, she disliked it.

A slow-built house stands firmest, there was a slow-built house, founded on a rock, the doors of which were shut to her, and which would, had it been open to her still, have made her exactly the sort of home that she liked. She was not going to hanker for that house, but she was about to plant a creeper on the wall without; she was going to try to decorate it.

She was going to Woodbury, because she had a cowardly distaste for Woodbury; she had a qualm at the thought of meeting Alethea, therefore it was, no doubt, that she went thither. She would rush this difficult fence and get past it. The dove must be thanked for—the civil must be done,—and besides this Bab wanted to do what she could for the empty house.

Trit-trot, trit-trot, on, on. Up the long avenue, past the conservatory; as she drew up at the closed doors, she found herself wishing that she had written her thanks,—a *p p c* card would have done for farewell, but Phil had rung the bell, it was too late now to turn back.

‘Yes, ’m, both Lady Young and Miss Young are at home.’

Alethea was alone in the room whither Miss Fenwick was ushered. She flushed painfully at Bab’s genial greeting, and then grew notably white.

‘The dove is fascinating, Alethea,’ Miss Fenwick went on, with enthusiasm, ‘how good of you to give me such a lovely thing; people are so kind; the stacks and stacks of presents that arrive are quite demoralizing.’

‘They will be on view, I suppose; we shall all have our chance of depreciating—and envying—everything.’

Cynical and chilly was the little lady’s manner upon this glorious morning. She, too, found it hard, bitterly hard to rejoice with those who do rejoice.

‘Father said you meant to be suggestive when you put the dove’s heart in his mouth,’ laughing. ‘I shall tell Stanhope.’

'What should I know of your dove's heart? If it is in his mouth so much the better for him, you'll be sure to have an excellent cook, Bab.'

The bride-elect thought for one silent moment, and Alethea went on speaking.

'You are none the worse for the blizzard, Bab; I never saw you looking better.'

'I'm all right, no rheumatism, no cold; nothing. Stanhope got lumbago for a day or two, and was very sorry for himself. Have you heard from Jack?'

'Yesterday.'

'Has he gone?'

'He sailed on Friday.'

'Was he all right?'

'I suppose so. Are you going to put up the cart and stay to lunch?'

'No, no, thanks very much, but I must get back early, I have never been so busy in my life, every one wants me all day long. Alethea, I am so glad Jack is——'

'Gone?' quickly, sharply. 'Glad he is gone?'

'I am glad,' looking surprised at the interruption, 'that Jack didn't knock himself up in the storm. It was fearful, Alethea, terrible, the snow was splintered ice, it cut, and dazed, and blinded one. There was no humbug about it, it showed itself in its true colours. I can't describe to you what the wind was, fusillades and cannonades, and real human shrieks; the noise was appalling, and the cold froze one's very muscles. When Jack fetched me in the morning, I couldn't stand.'

'Really,' with a demonstrative indifference to Bab's sufferings.

'Of course you've been overdone with blizzard in the *Gazette*, I won't cram any more experiences down your throat, but I am glad Jack didn't knock himself up altogether. He worked so hard, picking out sheep and digging the cows free in their stalls, and rushing to the

telegraph-office. He got my poor frozen fellow-traveller home, too. I believe he carried her for a quarter of a mile, and she was a good deal "fallen abroad," as she said! And Jack was quite well when he wrote to you?' 'Yes.'

'He told me about *it*, Alethea.'

Bab had had a trick of treating the great '*it*' lightly; '*it*' with her suitors had lightly come and lightly gone, but as soon as this candid remark had escaped her she felt that she had blundered.

'*What* did he tell you?'

Pale eyes can flash, and a hot indignation burn big in a very small person. Alethea had a knack of dodging about her meaning, of treating it sideways; but now she went direct as her comrade had done to the point. Poor Alethea, she had buried her '*it*' so deep, it was food on which to feed in secret, food to warm and fill her empty life, and the '*it*,' falling from those dewy lips, hurt like a blow.—Jack had talked of '*it*' to this glowing, comely bride-elect, with her 'stacks of presents,' and her 'Stanhope,' and her 'thick skin,' and her 'hard heart.' Gall and wormwood, must Alethea keep silence, nor speak

'Some certain truths of her'!

Was nothing but eulogy to fall upon those little ears from cradle to grave? Was this plunderer never to hear what her annexations cost those whom she robbed?

'You don't like his having told me, Alethea?' Bab was answering her face, not her words.

'Told you—what?'

'He wanted you to marry him.'

'He did not. He said so, but he did not want me at all.'

'Jack does not tell lies, Alethea.'

'What do you know about Jack, except that he can take a message, fetch a coat, and open a door? You

have never taken the trouble to find out anything more than the convenient uses of the people about you. You are selfish; you are so absolutely selfish that I, even I, old and ill and lonely as I am, I would not be such a woman as you are even for Jack's sake—and I would do much for him.'

Not comprehending the attack made upon her, Bab stood like a scolded child stands who is puzzled by a sudden incomprehensible fall from favour, startled, anxious, uneasy.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said, drawing a little away from Alethea.

'No, I see you don't; you can't understand, that is your disadvantage. To you one man is the same as another, he can carry and fetch, he is just as useful, as necessary as his fellow; no more, no less. No, you can't understand the damage you do. Understand? No, certainly not; for you, you, you are the person to tell me that Jack wants me to marry him.'

'He told me so,' slowly, 'himself.'

'And why? To save you a qualm for your part in his banishment: to save you a crumpled rose-leaf in your bed. He would marry me for the same reason; no wonder I was, I am flattered by the project; he "wants" me so much as that. I hope some day you'll find out the harm you have done him, and I hope you may——'

'Alethea!'

'I will speak out, you shall hear something besides congratulations now. I tell you, you have banished Jack, you have driven him from home, you have ruined him, you made him weak enough to think that he could compromise with me. What were you at when he told *you* that from pity, in despair, he had asked *me* to take your vacant place? What were you at when you drove him to defend himself at my expense? You can't

remember? No, your memory is vague. I can imagine it. I can imagine how glad you were that he had "got over it," how you "hoped we should be happy." I can fancy how you cut him to the quick. I know the torture of those bewildering confidences in the snow.'

'Alethea!' remonstrating, hurt, amazed.

'Such a life as yours,' fiercely, 'frittered away in lives you take and lives you spoil, is nothing but——'

Bab's pained and startled eyes had not checked the passionate anger of the attack, but the sound of an approaching footfall crushed all antagonistic element from the duologue as though it had never been. For the first time in her life Bab was glad when Lady Young came into her presence, she was glad to be cross-examined about the wedding, she was glad to be guarded from a tongue which had cut and hurt even more than the tongues at Woodbury had a knack of doing.

Lady Young was angry with the bride-elect, but she was athirst and hungered for the food and drink of her soul, she was on the track of news, her blue eyes in their old puckered lids had lost their beauty, but had retained and increased their keenness; she came for wedding details, and she got them flowing in gushes of preoccupied revelation from Bab's unsteady lips.

Lady Young noted the two faces before her, she who loved to stir up strife all the day long chuckled softly to herself, having some vague comprehension of the situation which she had disturbed; but the combatants made common cause against the incomer, and she got no rises, such as she sought, from either woman.

It almost seemed that the bride's modesty had ruined her manners, for Bab was constrained and awkward, and yet she stayed on talking of frocks, and presents, and guests, and Peels, until a tarantella danced by frantic hoofs upon the drive became audible in the drawing-room, when she abruptly rose to take her leave.

'We shall see you again before the 2nd?' said Lady Young, interrogatively.

'I am not sure, I am very busy, there are so many notes to write.'

'And so many fibs to tell, a wedding is made up of duplicities crowned with the pretty, poetical vows which we none of us keep. So this is a real good-bye.'

'I am saying no real good-byes. We shall live at Combe, you see.'

Lady Young shrugged her shoulders.

'I am afraid I could not be content in a caged Happy Family,' she said. 'You must go? Well, I will wish you good luck, which is magnanimous of me, for we bear you a grudge in this house. We have an empty chair which Alethea lays to your account. Good-bye. Good-bye.'

Alethea preceded the departing visitor, going right out upon the drive by the side of the cart, and when there holding out her hand as though she was not sure what its reception would be. But Bab took the small peacemaker politely.

'Bab,' said its pale owner, looking up straight into her eyes, 'you heard what mamma said. I bear you a grudge, Bab; you have everything in the whole world, don't—don't despise me.'

Bab, not knowing what to say, wrung the hand she held; her throat was husky, she cleared it.

'Good-bye,' she said gravely, and stumbled up into her cart, awkward in limb as in tongue. Then she took the reins and drove off down the drive; Brunette found the fingers on the rein were unsteady, and she took every advantage of the circumstance.

It was not usual for Miss Fenwick to receive advice from Phil. Woodbury had been left three miles behind before the man, who had been fidgeting and fretting on his precarious perch for some time, could not any longer restrain his tongue.

'Would you please to keep a bit firmer hand on her, miss, she's up to anything,' he said anxiously, 'Joe don't half exercise the 'osses.'

A firmer hand? How many more candid friends, armed with bitter home-truths, would attack this shattered bride-elect, whose shaky fingers betrayed with what ease the spirit had been knocked out of her?

Poor Bab, she had to face her new characteristics, those parts of her which banished, ruined, weakened, irritated, outraged her neighbours, and the presence of which she had not recognized until they had been pointed out to her frankly. Of course, Stanhope had told her of her blemishes, but it had been left to Alethea to wound and bruise her with their ruggedness, to press the blemishes home.

Of course, a selfish, empty young person had had no sort of right to enjoy herself, and to be content; every one had grudged her her happiness; they wished to close the gates of a fool's paradise, which, after all, had been paradise to her, and whither she would gladly return. Life was beginning to be hard, she had come to a turn in the sunshiny lane of youth, shadows lay across the road before her; her own shadow was cast at her feet, it lengthened as the light went down.

Her hands would tremble, but she gathered the reins in more tightly, in accordance with Phil's suggestion; and then her eyes brightened, for here before her in the lane there strolled a small familiar figure, an unobservant boy with whom she had much in common, and who would be glad of a lift on his homeward way. Bab wanted to talk, not to think, and Lance Campbell had lots to say quite disconnected with that worn-out topic, the coming wedding-day.

She drove on alongside the boy and pulled up, addressing him.

'Halloa, Lance, do you want a lift? I'll give you one.'

Brunette shied at the small figure, plunging and rebellious over the delay, objecting to a halt at any time, but especially objecting to a halt on the hill down which the stony road to Combe lay appetizingly before her.

'Thanks awfully,' said the boy, shifting the books he was carrying, and pocketing his catapult.

Phil was at Brunette's restive head.

'Düee git up sharp, sir,' he urged.

'Hurry up, Lance,' said Miss Fenwick, leaning forward to take some of the boy's books, which had slipped from a confining strap.

The mare was backing away from the groom, shaking herself ill-humouredly. Lance dodged up agilely into the cart, but dropping a lexicon on the road as he did so. Brunette testified her dislike to the thud of the fall by a kick that rang against the shaft.

Bab touched the rebel with the whip to remind her of her manners, but she had had her head all along the road and did not choose to be meek under coercion.

So she kicked again violently, viciously, but the kicking-strap held its own, there was no freedom of heels on the hill-top. Her bit was her own, it was in her power, she caught it between her teeth and reared on end.

'She's coming over on us,' said Lance, relishing the chance and grinning widely; but she did not come over, down she went again, swerving sharply from Phil as her hoofs touched the ground.

Frustrating the groom's effort to stop her, she bolted past him and tore at a break-neck pace down the hill before her; a flight of small birds rose from the hedge, the whirr of wings breaking with a noise at which she chose to take fright and to fly before.

Brunette had got out of hand on former occasions and had taken her cargo home with her at her own pace, but never before had Bab lost her nerve.

'Hold on, Lance, hold hard,' she cried; her wrists shook, her fingers were unnerved, her hands swayed clutching the reins, but impotent.

'I am holding. Stop her—oh, do stop her.'

The light cart swam in the air.

'Hold tight, Lance.'

'I am holding. I am not frightened. Do stop her.'

'Yes, yes.'

'I'm not frightened, but we shall get killed.'

Down that fearful hill, clattering over the loose flints, they swung; they reached the base in safety and turned into the narrow, shady lane. The way was level, high-hedged, rough, the cart rocked, and before them blocking, or seeming to block the lane, a waggon was approaching. Its driver shrieked out to them, drawing his horses close into the hedge.

'Jump out,' said Lance, in a whisper, 'do, jump out.'

'No, no. Hold on.'

She set her teeth for the crash. Fighting with Brunette for her head, she strained at the reins, strengthening her hands with a prayer. The wheels of the cart tore out the ferns, scraped grating through the clay soil of the hedge—and passed the waggon by.

'Don't touch me, Lance. Hold on, but not to me.'

The air rushed past them. Along the narrow lane they galloped like the wind, on, on—breathless they sat, waiting. Brunette was scared and reckless now, she swerved at the shadow of a tree once, and Lance cried out, they were so nearly over.

Before them lay the common, intersected with four cross-roads; they emerged from the dangers of the narrow road and rushed into the open. Near at hand a long ridge of stones lay piled around the sign-post. A gust of wind came across the furze and fluttered a piece of tattered paper out upon the road, it eddied forth from the shadow and danced in the sunshine across the stones.

At this small scrap of whiteness Brunette took fright. She darted away from it, plunging back and swerving against the sign-post, backing against the stones.

It had come at last, the sickening crash, the struggle—a fall, and then nothing—silence, stillness, a blank unfilled.

Then the blank was full of sound, odd sound, that roared in Bab's ears as the blizzard had done; the storm had come again.

But only for a moment did Bab lose consciousness, only for a moment did she visit that strange country that is neither dreamland nor death, but akin to both; then her power of thought returned unimpaired, she could see, hear, reason, comprehend. She opened her eyes, the sun shone on them, dazzling her vision; she found herself lying at length upon the ridge of stones.

'Lance,' she called, her voice was strong and clear, 'Lance!'

No answer.

'Lance.'

No answer. She must sit up and look for the boy. Ah! what was that on the flints close to her side? Was that his arm? that doubled-up, awkward, unlikelike arm that actually touched her coat? She looked at it closely, she looked again; the glove, the cuff, the boxcloth sleeve upon that arm were not Lance's. She knew them all, they were her own, the arm was hers. Broken, contorted, misshapen as the badly-shot wing of a wretched bird, it lay useless beside her. Not a pang, not a thrill of pain did she feel to tell her what had befallen the numb and tingling limb.

'Lance, Lance, do try and answer. I can't move, I can't come to you. Where are you, Lance?'

She heard a rustle in answer to her appeal, a rustle behind her, followed by a long sigh, and then some one seemed to be crying.

'Poor Lance. Lance, can you speak?'

'Rather,' gasping; 'but, oh, I say, it knocked the wind out of me. I was chucked here in the ditch: I'm mud all over. She's bolted with a wheel, she has. The rest of the cart is all mashed up on the road.'

'Are you hurt, Lance?'

'I'm trying to make out: there's blood, but it's only scratches. I'll get up in a moment and help you.'

What sort of help? she wondered, thinking of the effectual help which mercy gives to a winged bird.

'Lance, are you hurt?' Again she asked her question louder still. 'Can you move? Do you feel?'

'I'm coming over; I've sprained my thumb, that's about all. It don't hurt,' reassuringly, 'very much.'

Bab's mind was clear as air, her hearing acute. The boy came stumbling over the loose stones towards her; she could hear in the far distance quick footsteps on the road. She shut her eyes, the sun shone hot upon them, then Lance's shadow screened her, and she looked up into his face which was blood-streaked, quivering, but unblemished. He knelt down at her side, biting his lip at the sight of her tangled, twisted arm.

'You've got hurt.'

'Yes.'

'Your arm's broken.'

'Yes.'

'You have fallen a bit awkwardly. Can I give you a hand, and help you round?'

'I think we had better wait; but move the stone, it cuts my cheek. There are people coming, look down the road. You must send home for help.'

She shut her eyes again.

'I say, speak, do speak.'

'All right, Lance,—I will.'

'Go on speaking,—I can't bear it if you don't; I can't help blubbing—don't you see. I wish, I wish

you'd just move a bit,—your head's all turned wrong, don't you see. You don't know how queer, how bad it looks.'

'I can't move, Lance, don't be afraid, nothing hurts me—at all—I can talk, don't cry, it's just a rick, I ricked my back as I fell, it was a bad place to fall. You must send home for help.'

And there, until such help did come, she lay as she had fallen, Phil and half-a-dozen strangers flocking up from fields and homesteads gathered round her, but none had courage so great that they would be the ones to touch her.

'You must send home for help.'

Because the strength of love is unfathomable, because tender arms are brave, strong, firm, and do not falter at their work, because the task is grievous and the burden heavy, 'send home for help.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

For he said, 'Fight on, fight on,'
Though his vessel was all but a wreck,
And he said, 'Fight on, fight on.' — *The Revenge.*

'Though God take the sun out of heaven, we must have patience.'

As they pass from cradle to grave, people often find occasion to say,

'This is the saddest thing that I have ever heard in my life.'

Such words as these were on many lips in Devonshire now, for in truth a sad thing had befallen 'one of the nicest girls in the county.' Such a calamity as it was better to hear of, to talk about, to wring hands over than to see face to face. If we value our peace of mind, it is well to steer clear of those whom a supreme affliction has picked out from amongst us and made conspicuous.

The poor bride-elect, the poor thing. At every breakfast-table within a league of Combe her unfortunate spill formed the topic of conversation, all the morning it was discussed ; and there were some young people who could not get the weight of her misfortunes off their minds for several days ; whilst others shed luxurious though genuine tears, saying,

‘It really was too sad to think about, they wished they could forget it altogether.’

For the inside of a week no acquaintance down in the Vale of Combe passed each other on the road, carriages were drawn up, pedestrians halted, every one had something to tell or to ask, and all about Bab Fenwick.

‘Wasn’t it dreadful? She had been carried home, her father had reached the common in time to manage the moving, the Adams had met them on their way to Combe, the shock had made poor Mrs. Adams quite ill. The broken arm had been a sickening sight, but of course the injury to the arm was nothing, the back was damaged too, and—and—well—she was as strong as Hercules.’

‘Why had she been allowed to drive that unsafe horse? Every one knew that rashness was not pluck. By a little caution the accident might have been averted ; the speaker thought it was impossible to be too careful on wheels. It was shocking to think of, and the boy had escaped with a scratch, boys had the lives of a cat.’ The speaker was on her way to the rectory to hear (oh, the consolation of hearing, the joy of tragic details to the well-balanced mind,) ‘all about it.’

‘Mrs. Campbell won’t see any one ; it is a little absurd, but one knows what she always is. The person I pity is the poor young man. Susie saw him driving through Tipton this morning. Sir Joseph Andrew has been telegraphed for. Dr. Bedford and an Exeter doctor

have hardly left the house. I have been to inquire, but there seems nothing much to tell.'

The multitude of interested neighbours had nothing to do but to inquire: the lodge gates clicked perpetually. Mrs. Basten had few minutes in which to rest. The wedding itself could not have furnished more traffic; for close one upon another carriages bowled up the drive; close one upon another, coming and going, the village folk came to the lodge for news.

Just as usual the beautiful, old, grey house stood high with its misty background of wooded hills; its blinds were drawn up, its windows stood open. The water-fowl floated on the ponds, the rooks cawed as they circled about the beeches on the knoll. There was nothing there to whiten faces, or to subdue the voices of the people who came up in the sunshine, with cards and questions to show their sympathy, and yet they shivered at the sight of Combe, and were glad to keep the house at arm's length; they were glad to find that the gates near the house were shut, and that a servant was stationed there to guard all sound of wheel, or bell, or voice from reaching a certain room, which must be kept in perfect outward peace for the sake of its quiet inmate.

Barnes, who stood like a sentinel on the drive, was an old servant; he knew the inquirers, and could gauge the quantity and quality of their feelings, but he treated them all alike.

'Miss Fenwick's horse had run away; the cart had upset at the cross-roads. Miss Fenwick had been seriously hurt.'

That was all: he had a sort of half-shame over the misfortune of 'his family.' He had been proud of the prosperity at Combe: the victims of the tower of Siloam are, in a certain condition of society, much open to suspicion.

But when a certain yellow chariot rolled up, and

there looked out thence a pair of pale, wan eyes, and Miss Young, dumb, without an articulate note of voice, yet questioned him, his face worked in response to her unuttered words, and he forgot it was his duty to have no feelings to show, he forgot himself.

'She is in the morning-room, m'm. They took her straight in there. There are two nurses come; the arm is set. At first the doctors didn't think to trouble her; but'—could Miss Young's dim eyes read between the lines?—'now 'tis set. The London doctor is with her; he goes back by the night express. She is as clear as I am. No, m'm, they see no one, no one at all. Mr. Peel is here, he has been in there just a minute, but he can't bear up at all. Turn here, coachman, this way, if you please.'

Day after day carriages rolled up the drive, which was dumb with straw. In lieu of Barnes was a bulletin fastened upon the locked gates, which the people read. The bulletin did not vary, it was always worded thus:

'Miss Fenwick continues very ill.'

The members of the household were waylaid, Mrs. Basten was cross-examined, and the rectory besieged, and yet there was nothing more to tell than the bulletin had told—'Miss Fenwick continued very ill.'

Even behind the grey walls no more than that could be said. Bab lay quiet, passive, sensible, painless; and the people who loved her best sat and watched her. Passive, quiet, sensible, too.

Godfray and Mary marvelled at one another's strength; these impotent, anguished watchers played tranquil, patient parts. Action was endurance, passive endurance. Bab was to be kept quiet, and they were to be beside her with calm faces, steady voices; their reassuring peace of mind must infect her.

So they lived from hour to hour, neither looking to

to-morrow nor to yesterday, but battling through the bitterness of life minute by minute in the silent, transformed room where their daughter lay. Bab was what is called a good patient. Dr. Bedford, who knew her restless propensities, wondered to see her lie, while the day darkened to night and the night dawned to day, helpless, motionless, and yet uncomplaining. He told her,

‘How good she was, how she helped herself, and him, and those about her by her patience.’

And she was pleased at the praise and smiled. She did not talk much, but lay with her eyes fixed on the down-drawn blind; she seemed to be thinking.

Bab knew what guest was dreaded just now at Combe, she knew who stood at her elbow waiting, she knew who had come very close to her. So that her thoughts grew strange.

Strange and sad are the long thoughts of those who lie through days and nights, face to face with death. Strange and sad are the dreams which flock to them in sleep. To them the aspect of life changes, they stand apart looking dispassionately upon it.

Eyes which have looked into their open tomb know the wonder of the transformation; those eyes see a path strewn thick as autumn leaves with waste and rubbish, with flowers unpicked, with weeds unhoed, with work neglected.

The dying are restless for the deeds that are not done, they repent them of the lost days in which men can work. For to them come the coffin, the nailing, and the sod, for such as they the words ‘dust to dust’ were written.

‘How brave were those quiet people amongst whom all mankind shall lie. How did they face their death? were they afraid? Had they too, perhaps, forgotten they must die? Were they hungry for compassion?

Did they remember that their fate was the common fate of all, no tragedy at all?’

Sad and strange were Bab's thoughts, she kept them to herself as she lay watching the light behind the blind.

‘What if the bread
Be bitter in thine inn, and thou unshod
To meet the flints? At least it may be said
Because the way is short, I thank thee, God.’

A house of mourning is not a popular resort, and such a house had Combe become, a most depressing house. People stole about on tiptoe, hinges were newly oiled, bells were muffled; the silence lay like a weight on the place.

To add to the crushing anxieties of poor Stanhope Peel's position, his body was absolutely neglected. When week followed week, and the demoralized household still made the sick-room the centre of the universe; when week followed week and still the doctors were vague in their verdict, and his poor bride-elect was, at any rate, no worse, he relaxed his high tension of wretchedness about Bab, and began to talk a little of himself and his own manifold discomforts.

A man whose published aim in life was to ‘do himself well’ was out of place at Combe just now, for man and maid ignored Mr. Peel and his requirements, the cook no longer put her soul into her legitimate trade, the meals were bad and badly served, whilst old Fenwick and his wife sat through them, talking that awful sort of chit-chat which it is deemed etiquette to keep moving on the surface of supreme anguish before our fellow-man.

At first, in the shock and horror of the calamity, Stanhope had been as insensate about the food as the cook herself, he had felt no interest in his meals, he had been profoundly depressed; but no situation is so bad that a man cannot get used to it, and now he began to ask,

‘How much longer a fellow could stand this sort of

thing and keep fit? He was conscious of getting hipped, chippy, off colour, and off feed; he rather thought he was going to be ill; if once he broke down he should be a beastly nuisance where he was. He might as well be underground himself, he was so down on his luck.'

Then, by Mary Fenwick's advice, he went to Tregarvis, and when there took counsel with his people. They were shocked by his pale face and by his moodiness; he wished to do everything on the straight, but what earthly good did he do poor Bab by dangling about her sick-room door? She had not sent for him, he never saw her, he only heard the *hushing*, and saw the nurses pacing for constitutionals on the terrace; all the accessories of his misfortune were awful to him, they increased his misery, they made his blood run cold.

He would do everything on the straight, and so, groaning in spirit, he went back for just a night or two, into the thick of the horrors. How he loathed that dismal, sick house; how he shuddered as he drove thither. The straw which deadened the sound of his wheels set his teeth a-jar.

The same everlasting bulletin fluttered on the locked gates. Was this unhappy business to go on indefinitely, and wear out the youth and health of the unfortunate young man?

Chillier, gloomier, more deadly than ever was the hall he entered; he wished he had never left it. Upon his soul, it would have been better never to have turned his back on Combe, than to have had to face it again after his respite.

He was right, we get used to our burdens, and forget their size; but should we throw them aside and reload later, then their weight is impressive, each ounce tells.

Poor Mr. Peel, he had such a great dislike to sickness. Faugh! what a poor place the world seemed on this unhappy morning. Stealthily and with hanging head

he crept into the house, dreading what it might be his portion to come across in this place of shadows; but some one heard his entrance, some one who was bursting with good tidings, some one who was off his head, and who caught the young man's hand in a vice and wrung it till it throbbed.

'Stanhope,' and Captain Fenwick was within an ace of making a fool of himself, 'she is better. Sir Joseph is here again, he has seen her, he is with her mother now. She is better, there is a chance for her, a good chance for her.'

And the master of the house led Bab's lover across the hall as though he was leading him to his wedding; but Bab was not in bridal trim just yet.

For two-and-forty days and nights Brunette, the sinner, had lain, dead and still, in her grave on the common. For two-and-forty days and nights Brunette's mistress had lain, living and still, in her bed in the morning-room.

For two-and-forty days they had fought and prayed for her life, for her bare life, and it seemed that this boon might be granted them. The great doctor had been about her bed for an hour and more; upon the strength of his mighty self-assurance it was natural that they should lean, he brought hope with him. Mary had gone away with him, her hungry eyes upon his placid lips of knowledge, and Bab lay waiting for his verdict, waiting for her sentence.

The morning-room was transformed; screens, and two small beds—in lieu of cosy-corners, easels, and knick-knacks—furnished it; a gentle-faced nurse sat, knitting, out of sight of the other bit of humanity who lay still, tall, straight, in the quiet room.

The two-and-forty days and nights had brought about great changes at Combe; the sunny morning-room was shaded and metamorphosed, and poor Bab was changed.

There could be no doubt that the face on the pillow was hers, for the clear, brave, hazel eyes looked straight as of yore, looked straight at the new aspect of the morning-room, and faced it 'like a man,' as we say.

She had been spilt on the road, she was not the first girl who had come a cropper across country, or otherwise, and had had to pay for it. She had fallen awkwardly and hurt her back, she would face her bad luck 'like a man'; her undaunted eyes were unaltered.

But the rounded, downy, wind-blown cheeks, where were they? And the dewy red lips and the heavy trim plaits, where were they?

Bab's face had fallen sick, not her courage; it was her face which told tales, not her un murmuring lips. Her face told of the two-and-forty nights,

'When the house doth mourn and weep,
And the world is plunged in sleep,
Yet mine eyes the watch do keep;
Sweet Spirit, comfort me.'

Her lips kept their own counsel, her voice had acquired the inevitable note of weakness, but it had the knack to make the best of things as it had done when it rang clear, strong as a bell.

Days and nights had no very distinct personality now, they ran one into another and intermingled, so that time was very long and burdensome. Bab wanted to know what the great doctor of innumerable questions and unlimited sympathy had decreed; she had so much waiting to do now-a-days that she was getting accustomed to it, had learned to translate the hushed sounds of the household, and this accomplishment employed the minutes. She heard the doctor go, she heard Fritz bark at him as he went, and then her mother came back into the room and crossed to the bedside.

Mary's face told tales as did her daughter's—her haggard, worn, aged face, whose tender mother-eyes

understood a language without words,—she answered Bab's dumb question rapidly.

'You have improved, my dearest; he says you are better.'

Bab smiled, and moving her hand on the bed-clothes, watched it straying there a few inches at her will.

'I showed him I could move,' she said, 'so I must be better.'

Mary laid her lips upon the feeble traveller.

Behind the down-drawn blind the window stood open, the whirr of a mowing-machine was audible, the light wind full of the scent of fresh-cut grass fluttered the curtains softly.

'Am I going to get better, mother?' the weak voice was steady, but a little shrill.

'Yes, with God's mercy. Yes, darling.'

'Better,' faintly, 'or—or well?'

A mother may be jealous of happiness for her own, but it is an unfortunate mother who feels a jealous pang at the sound of a mower's footfall on the turf. Mary could not speak, she had been cruelly tried. Bab's lover had met her on her way thither, and in his disappointment and his pain, he had blurted out his readings of Bab's sentence.

'I thought he meant she was going to be all right, Mrs. Fenwick, they came out to me and seemed to think it was all right. But it's worse than ever. What is she to do? Bab, to lie like a log? Bab, tied to a couch? Bab, an *invalid*? What will she do? Great God in heaven, what will she do?'

Stanhope, in the wretchedness of this new aspect of the future, had attacked Mrs. Fenwick; what could she say to him, what could she say now?

'Better—or well, mother?'

Still more faintly came the question the second time, but Bab's fearless eyes steadied her mother's voice, her

eyes asked for the truth and meant to face it. Bab's eyes shamed the rush of Mary's tears.

'My own, my dear one, think what it is to us, we shall have you here to—to love,—you will get better, you are better. The rest, Bab, we must leave the rest ;' and then she bent her face very close to her daughter's and whispered half-inarticulately, "'His compassions fail not, they are new every morning.'"

Bab looked at the fluttering blind ; so it was to be better, not well. Compassion ? Unfailing compassion, she needed it no doubt, but then so did other people. Sick-beds were common and 'bed-liers' not rare. Compassion, but not self-compassion ; compassion from God and courage from His creatures, just those two things must get people over fences, however hard, however high.

She closed her eyes, just then she would have liked to turn her face to the wall, but this she could not do, that spill on the stones had done for her, with a ricked neck and a hurt back there was little left that could be achieved ; one thing there was, and it was a natural thing for Bab to do : she might make the best of better, she might make the better, good.

She had not made a god of *Pluck* from babyhood without conciliating that deity ; he stood by her now, he soothed all the worst aspects of the morning-room and proved his worth, his high place amongst the gods to every inmate of Combe.

No one, in all the annals of humanity, ever heard of a bride-elect who was a—*a* cripple, of a bride who could not turn to greet her bridegroom. No one, in all the annals of humanity, ever heard of a permanently damaged woman who expected to have a lover at all.

No fellow could spend his whole life hanging about a sick-house on the off chance of a few words with an invalid.

With love and marriage Queen Bab had done as surely as she had done with much mortal fare upon this earth, this world of ups and downs, this perplexing world where the unexpected happens and blue devils range most freely.

Poor Mr. Peel got 'blue devils' when he thought of Bab's future, he pitied her with a pity that hurt him so much that he felt it was his duty to shake it off, to get away from it. Bab had been energetic, stalwart, robust, restless, he could not picture her a prey to languor, and aches, and pains, and nerves, to all the miserable necessities of ill-health. Of course some women ailed a lot, there were frail, fragile girls he had known who made graceful, natural invalids, but athletic Bab was not one of these. Poor wretched Bab, he only wished to God he could forget the whole business. He only wished that he had never set foot in Devonshire.

Something must be done, it was no good beating about the bush; 'he wanted to do everything on the straight,' and so he told grave, white-lipped Captain Fenwick as he talked his prospects over with him one summer morning on the terrace.

Nothing could have been more reasonable than Bab's father, he met Stanhope half-way, jumped agilely to awkward conclusions, and smoothed the back-door exit, making the sundering of the ties as easy as they could be made to the unfortunate man.

So the farewell between the lovers came to pass, the ceremony did not last long, mutually they did what they could to shorten it. Though there had been no romance about that engagement of theirs, yet in the severing of it there was a pang or two to be borne. Bab did her part gracefully, she was not agitated, she put aside his pity, she made Stanhope feel that the parting was inevitable, that he was behaving 'on the straight.' She made

him feel pleased with himself, she said he had always been awfully good to her, she sent messages to his people. She treated him as chief mourner, and seemed to take kindly to her own part of suffering, as so many sufferers have an inestimable knack of doing. Altogether, though he broke down when he left her, yet he was immensely relieved by her attitude.

She was settling down quite comfortably in her prison.

It was natural, it was inevitable that Mr. Peel should go, but when he drove off that afternoon the master of the house went off to the empty green and white room up-stairs, and spent a bad hour there in sight of the rough-weather coats and capes, and the hanging dresses that had been cast off as the sunshine had been cast from their dear owner's life, his heart failing him ; he gave up the struggle for composure and cried over one of the porpoise boots like a child, feeling better when he had let himself go. That holding in hand is hard work, and Godfray had had much of it.

Mr. Peel had gone and then the presents went back, and Mrs. Fenwick sat writing note after note, note after note to the kind donors. Amongst them was one note which was far longer than its fellows, and which got blotted in the writing ; it ran thus,—but it was not sent, Mrs. Fenwick tore it up, and wrote a calmer, shorter letter to her sister :—

‘Combe, Aug. 2nd.

‘DEAREST CICELY,

‘We are sending everything back, they were all pushed out of sight, but now that Stanhope has gone they, too, must go. We cannot bear the thought of them. Amongst the rest I find your buckle, she was so pleased with it. I helped her to undo the case the evening she came back from Tregarvis. I have just left her, nurse is pleased because the couch is turned so that Bab can see the sky. I am a wicked woman—I

came away. The inactive life brings on many ailments, but she is wonderful, she never complains; think of Bab not able to stretch out her hand to pat her dogs, and think of her always patient, always patient. And we are getting used to it, we are beginning to think it natural to see her as she is, to answering "And how is Bab?" conventionally. Godfray drove to-day for the first time; I was glad that he should go, but for all that I *hated* it. The sharpness of the pain is blunting to us—but to her, poor darling, it will not blunt, but it will get more keen till—till when? Do come, Cicely, do come, the summer days are so long, and Dr. Bedford says we must do everything that is possible to keep her as she is. If she loses heart, if her courage fails her she will lose her best hope, her one chance. I have no right to ask you to such a house as ours, but with no excuse except that I want you, I think you will come.

'Your loving sister,

'MARY FENWICK.'

CHAPTER XXX.

Can I approach thee, I, who cannot move?
How shall I answer thy request for love?
Look in my face and sec.—E. B. BROWNING.

'A slow-built house stands longest.'

IN the quick days of strength and vigour, Bab had never known how to say die. Through the hot violence of summer, through an autumn when there was nothing for sport but tough old Time, with a frame which took much slaying, right on into the company of the bully winter who attacks sickness, old age, and poverty, letting health and wealth and youth go scot-free, Bab lay on the shelf and made no sign of rebellion at her lot.

She got through the unutterable weariness of inaction

much in the same charming way as she had got through long days after hounds, or birds, or fish. Those who knew her best of all looked at her, incredulous, amazed ; such a faculty for endurance was a royal gift. A year ago there were those who would not have accredited Queen Bab with any patience at all ; but behold her as she was ! No martyr on her bed, but merely one of many unfortunates, an unfortunate who had a knack for taking the rough precisely as she had taken the smooth of her life. People had left off talking of the accident, they had forgotten the wedding festivities of which they had been defrauded ; after all, poor Bab had everything which a damaged girl could have to make existence a success ; that spill at the cross-roads was a tragedy, but a tragedy of the past ; some recent event was a more interesting subject for discussion.

One young woman in the prime of her life was shelved, but remember the surplus female population ; plenty of young women remained ; golf and tennis, boating, balls and picnics went on just as they had done in the past though Bab had dropped out of it all.

Once more visitors came to Combe, there was no straw on the drive now, no hushed voices and pale faces, but kindly people intent on doing their duty to the invalid. Girls invaded the morning-room, bright and sweet and sunshiny maidens who twittered to Bab of their doings. Lance, shy of her in her new guise, came now and then with a bird's-egg, or a fossil, or something that he was sure would interest her as an offering, but backing away and leaving her at the first opportunity with the repugnance of a young heathen for damaged humanity. She heard of bags, runs, balls ; the nurse amused her with tales of suffering to which her easy couch was a bed of roses. Again she heard those calls for ' Mary, Mary,' to which she had been accustomed from her nursery days.

Even in those days when the hearer could have gone in answer to her father's call, it had not been 'Bab' that he had wanted, he had not gone on the hunt for his daughter whenever he found himself indoors.

Noisy life resumed its old sway at Combe; people were, mercifully for them, getting used to the morning-room, with its screens, and flowers, and its two small beds.

'It was just like him,' Lady Young said, turning down the corner of her little mouth to show that she did not approve of his similitude. 'Just the sort of thing I should expect of him. Insanely impulsive as his poor, dear father, who proposed to me only the third time we met. I am ashamed of him, he sacrifices his prospects and his passage-money, and makes an utter fool of himself before the whole county. Coming home now! The girl wouldn't look at him as long as she could get out of his way; and my poor infatuated son hangs about her room, fetching and carrying like an upper servant. It makes me furious. If it goes on, I shall tell them what I think of it.'

And it did go on. In the mist, and fog, and dreariness of November Jack Holland had come back from India; he had come, he said, defiantly, 'home.' He had not been invited to Combe, but he was there; he had not been asked to stay on, but there he abode.

He had followed Mrs. Fenwick into Bab's presence on the day of his arrival, and had shown that complete self-control which his mother might have, aptly, compared to that of an upper servant, for he saw his lady of quicksilver still as one of the uptorn trees by which they had stood, he and she, in the blizzard; he saw the tell-tale face, understanding its language, and yet he only said,

'How are you, Bab?'

And when Mrs. Fenwick indicated by a gesture that

the hand on the coverlet was willing, but unable to greet him, he took it gently in his, and only smiled when its owner told him,

‘I can’t shake hands, Jack, not yet, but I’m much better.’

She was a little agitated at meeting her old playmate, but he was quite at his ease, quite at home; he sat down at her side as though there was nothing to wring his heart in the new arrangement of that well-remembered room, and talked steadily with his white lips, though there was a look in his eyes from which Mrs. Fenwick turned away.

‘Are you going to stay, Jack?’ asked the voice that had been in his ears night and day, the voice which he had prayed to hear again, and was praying now for strength to answer comfortably.

‘Yes,’ and he looked very straight at Mary, and the ‘yes’ was glowing, rapid.

Then he calmed his voice, and made a dozen explanations wherewith to account for his return. England seemed to be good enough for him, he would never set foot outside the British Isles again.

‘I’m so glad;’ her eyes, which seemed the only living part of Bab that was not a wreck, smiled. ‘I’m glad you got sick of grilling and stewing amongst the niggers, Jack. Are you going?’

‘Yes, I must unpack,’ clearly.

‘You will come back soon?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you go out, Jack, do take the dogs. Father forgets them, and they miss their walks.’

This touch from the past sent him to his unpacking speedily, sent him with Dan and the dachshunds out upon the hills for such a walk as the poor old collie found over-long and fast, and brought him back with eyes flayed and swollen by the wind, but full of steadfast

purpose, and bright with a steady light such as had not shone in them for many a month.

Christmas would be a difficult epoch that year ; just till Christmas Jack was left to work his own will, he was, they all recognized the fact, a comfort in the house, but he should not be allowed to become a necessity.

One winter morning Mary Fenwick came to him, and pointed out the way which he must go ; the obvious way which a wise man should go,—away, away from Combe. She pleaded with him patiently, she did not tell him that an offensive letter crackled in her pocket, a letter which spoke truth and which drove Mrs. Fenwick to talk out plainly, and to show the silent hearer what a wild thing he was doing. He listened to her arguments with kindling eyes and set, inexorable mouth.

‘You must not sacrifice your whole life, Jack, we must not allow you to do it, you must be saved from yourself. It would be kinder to go now, when she will miss you less than she would do if you stayed on till the spring. Because you are here, because you want to stay, because you have come to such a house as this, because——’

He interrupted her with an inarticulate mutter that was not patient.

‘Don’t,’ he said, ‘don’t talk like this ; you never understood, Mrs. Fenwick, and you don’t seem to understand yet. Why do you talk of *such a house as this*, as though it’s to be shunned ? What do I *sacrifice* by staying here ? Am I not under the same roof as Bab ? Can’t I fetch and carry for Bab ? Can’t I see her and hear her talk ? Don’t you know that I care for nothing on earth but Bab.’

‘But, Jack,—now——’

‘Yes, now. Why should I change now ? Can I leave off being fond of Bab now ? It would be a strange time to begin. Look at her, look at her dear eyes, I never

saw such brave eyes. God bless her! Leave her now? Go now? Why? I never dreamed that *you* would dare to ask me to go *now*.'

In the Far East Jack had acquired calm, cheerful, even spirits, which he had brought back with him as novel possessions, but now he broke down and paced to and fro the drawing-room, keeping his face from his companion, and clearing his throat roughly once or twice. Over his head was the picture of Guido's 'Sleeping Christ,' at his heels was Fritz, the dachshund, looking up curiously at the young man.

'It may be for so long,' said Mrs. Fenwick, bravely. 'You think that you can go on living from hour to hour for Bab, living just to help her through her long days, Jack; it is good of you even to think it; but you must count the cost, it will cost so much,—I must speak to you—it may be for so long.'

'It will be,' passionately, 'till the day I die. If I had married Bab—it was not my fault that I did not marry her—would it not have been for better and for worse, in sickness and in health? Could I love her more if she was my wife? Don't drive me mad by talking, the only way to bear it is to *do*, not to think, and argue, and look ahead. I'd rather know she likes me in the place and hear her say, "When are you coming, Jack?" than be Chancellor. Can't I do what I like best? Can't I stay in the one home I've got, with the one person I love, without being warned, and thanked, and tortured needlessly?'

Mrs. Fenwick was silenced, rated and silenced, yet she looked with a tender smile upon her accuser, and took his hand in hers, lifting it to her lips,—and it came to pass that the unreasonable young man continued his abode at Combe, and Mary said no more. He seemed to have no objection to being censured by his mother; nor to being stared at and talked about in the

neighbourhood; nor to being questioned by candid friends; nor even to being understood and commended by Alethea Young.

Just at first Dr. Bedford was suspicious of Jack's visits to his patient's precincts, but soon the suspicions vanished and the doctor openly prized his presence at Combe. For Jack was calm, judicious, practical, possessing an unfathomable faculty for understanding Bab's inclinations, together with vast tact and unfailing cheerfulness. In fact, he owned an array of excellent nursing attributes such as are invaluable in illness, and such as cannot be engaged at two guineas a week.

Between Jack's indomitable spirits and Bab's indomitable pluck the winter in the morning-room wore away less tediously, less slowly than the autumn had done; though endless, dragging, uneventful, undramatic suffering hung about a couch where vigorous life was chained to inactivity.

Again spring ousted winter, again summer flushed the flowers, again October came, stripping the trees bare, and still Bab lay prone with steady, though pale lips, and alert eyes before which the prospect had widened, for the doctor had raised her head upon pillows so that she could watch the coming and the going from end to end of her room, and she could see such wayfarers as passed her open windows.

A new life had come her way, the life of books; capital company were the people of whom Jack read to her, and they did not bustle and twitter, and make her heart ache vaguely as her occasional visitors had a way of doing.

Then the banjo was always within Jack's reach, he twanged it very softly as he sang the songs of the West, and the old plantation melodies, quiet tuneful ditties, no violent love-songs now-a-days, but airs which she hummed long after his voice had ceased to make music about her prison.

Jack fetched and carried, waiting upon her hand and foot, while she lay and took his service, so it seemed to the wondering bystanders, as a matter of course. From her youth up she had taken his servitude as part of her goodly heritage, only now she asked for Jack, wanting him, watching for him much as in old days she had asked for, wanted, and watched for her daily, hourly employments.

There came a day upon which Dr. Bedford's patient horse stood an unconscionably long while at the door, while his master was closeted in the drawing-room with Captain and Mrs. Fenwick. For so long a time did the consultation last that Jack fidgeted about the hall, asking himself what the delay meant, fretting himself sick at heart, and knowing that he must not show his cold, stiff face in the morning-room. When the conclave broke up, Mary came across the hall, pausing beside Jack with her eyes upon the ground.

'Well, what is it?' abruptly; 'is she worse?'

The re-birth of a dead hope is painful, the throbs are acute, keen. When Mrs. Fenwick stammered out, 'No, no, she is not worse at all, but *better*,' Jack could not speak.

The hope was not such as would turn a rational brain. Dr. Bedford had declared that his patient had improved beyond his expectations, that she might be moved, that she might be promoted to a wheeled carriage, and when the weather warmed she might be taken out.

'Out, out, out,' Jack said these words incoherently, they took his breath away; and then he went back to Bab to tell her these good tidings. In such a case a mere scrap of hope fires the brain.

It seemed that he had not inherited from Lady Young so much as her knack for telling news with dramatic interest. He could not get out his scrap of intelligence, he beat about the bush and broke it to Bab, as people break calamity.

‘What are you thinking about, Bab?’

Her eyes were on the window, her hands, beautiful, delicate, fine-grained, transformed, were folded together on the coverlet; he could never bear to look at her hands, they told too much.

‘I’m thinking of—nothing,’ and she smiled; ‘you know I never really think. If I thought, Jack, I should get cross. I should think—oh, but I won’t think.’

‘Then what were you watching, Bab?’

‘The clouds,’ she said, ‘sailing slowly by the window, tattered and thin, and going out of sight in a moment. I’m glad you have come, Jack, I was getting cross, the clouds move all the time. What did you say?’ She looked up, her features were peeked and worn, her thick hair was parted and brushed very smooth, her lashes looked ink-black on the extreme whiteness of her cheeks, her eyes were over-large for health, but clear and lustrous; he looked at them earnestly. ‘Am I grumbling? I did not mean to grumble—I——’

‘Dr. Bedford was here a long while,’ he said abruptly, for Bab broke off, unclasping her hands, it was an accomplishment of which she was proud, evidently she was reminding herself of her advantages.

‘Yes. I went through all my tricks like a dog, he put me through them all, and then he said I may knit, or crochet. Jack, you’ll have to teach me how,’ she laughed a spontaneous merry laugh. ‘Jack, I will knit your socks, of course I will, that is a good idea.’

‘Dr. Bedford has been talking about you, Bab, he says you may be moved.’

Her eyes returned to his.

‘Moved? Where? When?’

‘You can be moved when you like. You can have a wheel-carriage and go out, out into the garden. Out anywhere.’

He need not have been afraid, she saw no pathos in

her new advantage, she saw nothing but its mercy, nothing but its merit.

'Out,' her voice vibrated in the word, 'out,' she drew a vast breath, her eyes grew deep, awe-struck, they shone. 'Oh, Jack, thank God.'

This was her way of taking it, she thanked God, from the name of Whom Jack had of late shrunk for her sake.

'You will be feeding your Plymouth rocks, Bab, in the summer.'

Intentionally he touched merely upon the surface, stirring depths and raking out the bottom of minds is bad sick-nursing; but his voice invested the Plymouth rocks with the element which he had tried to avoid, and Bab caught her breath and burst out crying, trying to say something about 'never dreaming, never thinking, never hoping,' and choking her words with sobs.

Tears were not easy with Bab, they were hard, hot, stinging, and her sobs shook her poor, helpless limbs, she was ashamed of them, but her patience was not altogether the outcome of her nature, her fortitude had been the growth of effort, she had begun to dream of the value of a Queen's Garden just as her plot was lost, and——

'For God's sake, Bab,' said Jack, 'do not cry. You never cry. You are always so plucky, don't give up now; now, when they tell you you are getting on.'

Bab struck him dumb by her unexpected words.

'You must go,' she said, 'you *must* go. If I'm really getting better, you will have to go away.'

He was silent and she went on, less emotionally, to explain her meaning.

'Every one thought, I thought that I should die, Jack, then you came, and I let you stay; I knew you'd like to think you'd done all you could for me, that is why I let you stay. But I am not so vile as to keep you now. You must go. You must not waste your

life on a wheel-chair, and a sick woman. You have done everything, but now there is no more to be done.'

'Nor to be said,' said he, lightly. 'If she is rude to me I shall waste nothing on any fair lady, and if she doesn't mind her p's and q's she will get no promotion, no wheel-chair at all.'

'I mean it, Jack, I mean it.'

'I know your Majesty means it, I quite understand, but I assure you I shall not take less than a month's warning. At the end of the month we will reopen the question.'

'I mean it, Jack.'

'So do I, Bab. I mean it is hardly gracious to snatch at the first opportunity to get rid of me. But leave the question now, we will discuss it all another day.'

'I can never argue, Jack.'

'No, thank heaven,' said he, answering the smile in her eyes with a low laugh.

And for many a long day no more was said on the subject.

On a sunny day in June the grass at Combe was down, and the haymakers were busy turning the new-mown hay. The wheel-chair was out and about in the fragrant air. Morning, noon, and night, ever since its advent, the wheeled chair was sure to be found prowling about, seeking for sheltered corners when the wind blew high, making for sunshiny reaches should the day be cold, resting in the shade when the sun burnt hot, drawing up where a view of the misty, far-away hills could best be caught, pausing where the roses bloomed most richly and where the strawberries ripened reddest.

The ubiquitous carriage knew where the best of everything was to be had at Combe. It had been down to the lodge that morning, and Mrs. Basten had come out 'tü tellee a bit' to Miss Fenwick, to assure her "'ur were lüken up nice, that 'ur were,' in fact to exchange pleasantries with 'th' paw craytur.'

The 'paw craytur' was far more cheerful than Mrs. Basten, both she and Mr. Jack were, as Mrs. Basten told her husband that night,

'Naw given tii craking, an' I dü sim missie's th' awpel ov his oye, Jan, vur awl 'ur's sich a paw craytur.'

'I naw'd et,' said Basten, shortly. 'Th' t'other wint up th' country, an' 'ee are marr'd a widdy woman wi' a terrabul lot ov money, I'm tawld. 'Ee turn'd hisself like a boret 'ull turn hisself, backsifor, wi' th' tide.'

'I up and sayde summat about 'un, Jan, tü missie, but 'er laffed.'

'Yü up and zay wot rummage zoever draps into yer 'ayde. Awl yer tongue an' let 'un be; tidden tongues as does it. Hundurds and hundurds ov times I've azaed et, "'tes they thir ballowen cows as vurgits thir calves th' vurst." Mister Jack, 'ur wint away paceabul whin 'ur wadden wanted; an' yer 'ur be now along; that's how 'tez.'

'Jan, dü 'ee stid zo hard as 'ur did bygone along?'

'Noa, 'ur doarn't.'

'Awe,' Mrs. Basten smiled to herself as she returned to the cradle of her last-born. 'Poar maid,' she said, rocking the sleeping infant gently, 'ur ain't much ov et vur a swateheart; but thir, 'ur ain't a bedlier howsum-ever, and 'tez th' Lord's doings.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

I wondered at the bounteous hours,
The slow result of winter showers,
You scarce could see the ground for flowers.

TENNYSON.

'One way by different steps.'

CAUTIOUSLY and slowly the wheeled carriage rolled homewards from the lodge; the charioteer talked a good

deal, but Bab was quiet, ominously thoughtful. Once or twice she looked at Jack's firm profile, and then away from the familiar foreground of her vision to the blue distance of the hills.

Jack drew up by the ponds, but Bab would not watch the sepia waterfowl floating under the shade of the rushes, save with an absent eye. She hardly saw the long line of haymakers raking even ridges of hay, or the machines whirling the fresh-cut grass and scattering it thin on the shorn turf to be baked in the burning sunshine, though haymaking was the sort of picture which she liked best of all the many pictures which Jack spread out before her, day by day. How would the landscape look without its foreground? How should she get along when she had smudged his face out of the scene?

Far off she saw two figures busy cutting baskets of roses from the garden near the house, her mother and Aunt Cis were wandering leisurely on the turf, and the master of the house stood on the high ground before Combe, talking to the bailiff, scanning the horizon, suspicious of the weather, deprecating the crop.

The wheel-carriage drew no special attention, it was an old story now; more impressive as a blot on the scene to its occupant than to the others. She wondered, with one cowardly pang, how long it would take her to get so at home with illness that she would feel no shyness in being left alone in its company. Then once more she looked up at Jack, but he was watching the fowl and looked serene, content, unconcerned; he would not help her.

No, Jack was a skilled thought-reader, he knew that there was trouble in this balmy air—ay, even more trouble than usual in the invalid carriage which he had taken upon himself to pilot through the world, and he could not go to meet it. He gathered himself together for the conflict which must come.

‘ When are you going, Jack ? ’

He turned and looked down into her face, he was standing there above her ; this advantage of his struck her as she spoke, and he knew that it had done so.

The dachshunds had taken advantage of the halt to stretch themselves out in the sun and sleep, but at the sound of his mistress’s voice old Dan sat up on his haunches and looked inquiringly at her ; he was always alert for orders now-a-days, surprised when none came his way, and inclined to blame his deaf ears. He haunted the wheeled carriage ; lame and breathless though he was, he never once shirked exercise, nor sneaked away to his rug.

I do not think Dan’s constancy surprised any one ; it was no more than is expected from a dog. With a man it is otherwise, every tongue was primed with amazement at Jack’s behaviour, faithfulness from a man is an attribute to which experience does not give expectation.

The shadow from the hood of her carriage fell on Bab’s face ; her anxious, earnest eyes met his ; her face, from which her nut-brown hair, long enough now to be plaited trimly, was brushed back beneath a knotted lace handkerchief, flushed red and hot ; her hands, her fair thin hands, were tightly pressed together and trembling. These signs of what had befallen Bab struck him afresh, Bab with her nerves of steel, the Bab whom he could see even now as a little maiden raking in the line of hay-makers, with hands tawny with sun and air, with a sun-bonnet falling back from a tangled mane of flying hair. Mrs. Fenwick’s ‘ little maid ’ who tumbled in haycocks and drove in the waggons, who was here, there, and everywhere, a white dab of quicksilver on the hot grass ; and who now lay dependent, helpless, an object of pity to the poorest labourer on her land.

Jack’s compassion was godlike, it never failed him, it was new every morning, it could not stand an increase

and keep within bounds. He could not speak, and she repeated,

‘When are you going?’

He did not pretend to misunderstand. He meant to get to the bottom of her misgivings and root them out, to be cast away once and for all.

‘When you give me my marching orders, Bab. I will be off when you are sick of me. When you can’t be bothered with me any more, then I will go.’

Again she changed colour, pressing her pale lips together.

‘Don’t be angry, Jack,’ she said, earnestly.

‘I am not angry, but tell me what I have done.’

‘It is what I have done; I have been odious, but I don’t want to be the same now.’

‘I like you “odious,” if that is what you have been.’

‘Don’t put me off. You—you do too much for me. It isn’t fair. I can do nothing. I know what a nuisance I am. I always want something done. I know, I know it all; illness is so long, it palls upon every one,—it is all unnatural, it is not right for a man to be wasting his life like this. Let me speak, holding my tongue about it does no good.’

‘Do you think,’ very gently, ‘that I don’t understand?’

‘You are a man, undamaged. Why——’

‘Why,’ he interrupted her. ‘Why, because—let me remind you—because we are, you and I are friends. Because in the days of which we are thinking, when you were not the height of a haycock, Bab, I hung about you on the chance that you might want a helping hand, or a finger to hold to when you were tired out with play. You never wanted a hand then, you only took it of necessity; you never wanted a finger unless you came a cropper. You would not be helped. But

now, Bab, be generous now. For the love of heaven, don't turn away from me now.'

Jack knew of the trio of great physicians, Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet, and Dr. Merryman, but he could not carry out the two latter gentlemen's directions just then; he spoke rapidly, passionately, and left Dr. Merryman to go right away from the hayfield.

Bab knitted her forehead, still looking at the speaker with intentness.

'Once,' she spoke slowly, under her breath, 'when I was well, you left me.'

'“I built up follies like a wall to intercept the sunshine and your face.”'

'That is only—poetry.'

'It was only—but I won't confess, I won't say what it was. Bab, I like to be here, I like to be at Combe; I like to keep out a hand in case by some good chance it should help a brave, dear friend of mine.'

'Hush,—you spoilt me, Jack, but I won't spoil your life, indeed I will not. Your *life*, your *work*, you used to tell me of all the good, great things you would do. I can't keep you from them all.'

'So I'm to get to work,' said he, getting back his quiet voice, for her dilating eyes warned him to be careful; he must not protest but explain, speaking common-sense, no heroics. '*My work*, the pronoun gives it an air, of course, but what is work, Bab? Bread-and-cheese and occupation, not much else. Here is bread-and-cheese and occupation at Combe in good company. Life—Bab? We talk tall about the little span that is rounded with a sleep, and of such stuff as dreams are made; we plan out the sore riddle. *My life*, the pain of it is mine, but what else?'

He took his hat off, shook back his hair, watching her meanwhile; she was silent, listening, and he went on,

'Yes, I went away because you did not want me. If you can tell me now that I must go, very well, I will go. I will leave the things of life that seem great to me here, behind me, and I will go away and live alone—and try to bear you no malice, Bab.'

'I—I can't keep you here, I am ill.'

'I'll put it another way, Bab; think, if your mother had been hurt that day, if she had been brought home as you were. If she was on those cushions as you are, think that she looked you in the face and said, "Go, go, I am too proud to take when I cannot give. Go, I am strong enough to bear my fate alone. Go from your home, go away from me, and live the big thing I call *life*. The big, incomprehensible, great life, such as has nothing to do with the little things of the little passing moments, nothing to do with the little gives, and takes, and hopes, and happinesses, nothing to do with the disappointments, the anguishes, and the solaces of every day." There is *no such life*, Bab, no great life at all. Do not say "go." Do not say "I can do as I am alone, I am strong, and will take nothing even from a friend." Do not give me loneliness, solitude, banishment, and call it by a wrong name. Be generous, Bab, and tell me shall I go?'

He saw her lips relax, their corners curving, and pressed her hard for that which he sought.

'You can't argue, Bab, allow that you are ashamed of your suggestion, and I will overlook it.'

'I am ashamed, but not of that.'

'Haven't my arguments convinced you? You know you are so easily convinced. Am I to pack this afternoon and go?'

'No—not if——'

'No ifs; the question is settled. I understand, Bab.'

'I know you do—you understand too well.'

‘And I may stay in the corner of the world that I like best of all?’

‘Yes, you help me, Jack; it has been what you call it, a—a *sore riddle*.’

‘I don’t think it’s a conundrum we can guess, Bab, the more guessing, the more we are puzzled; but I’m sure we can help each other on, two face it better than one. And,’ starting the wheeled carriage on its homeward route, ‘if you’ll be good enough not to give me sudden warnings to be off,’ smiling at her, ‘it will be very kind of you. I want a permanent place on your Majesty’s staff, more than ever, Bab, more than ever.’

Mrs. Fenwick and her sister were coming across the hay to meet the cavalcade of dogs, and knight, and lady. Mrs. Kaufmann wore a widow’s crape and muslin; she had lately come, subdued and quiet, from her husband’s death-bed. She was shaking off the first effects of her widowhood in her sister’s company, and talking of settling down once more in Devon, within reach of the grey house on the hill. She said the sight of a man who knew his own mind and stuck to it was refreshing and did her good; she said, that as she was obliged to grow old she might do it gracefully with Primrose-league, and a parish-nurse, and flannel, and woolies, and Friendly girls.

And, though this she did not say, the best half of Mrs. Kaufmann was always lurking about her sister’s home, and she had an affection for her better part and thought it would grow strong in the pure air, with a *tableau vivant* of endurance, courage, and constancy to keep up her faith in such attributes, always in view amongst the hills and vales.

‘Frivolity, we like it very much so long as it likes us, Mary,’ she said, ‘but it’s a bore when it won’t meet us three parts of the way. I can’t go limping after it any longer, it’s a dismal object in the sere and yellow leaf.

There is no such comfortable comrade after all as a purring conscience on one's hearth, I am going to stroke mine down with politics, philanthropy, and—and other things.'

'Stroke it within reach of us, Cicely.'

'Yes, yes, you remind me of my possession, for years and years and years I've forgotten it, it never was any sort of encumbrance till lately.—Here comes that wonderful man; how did Bab bewitch him, how did she do it? He is like a devoted woman, he has eyes and thoughts for no one but for her. She is plucky, she is a dear, but——'

'It is such an old friendship, Cicely, he was so fond of her when she was a child. The slow-built house stands longest.'

'She has a colour to-day, Mary; she does, indeed she does look better.'

Mrs. Fenwick nodded, and then the carriage reached them, and they turned and walked up, talking together, to the house.

An excellent constitution, intelligent nursing, Dr. Diet, Dr. Quiet, and Dr. Merryman did not get so much credit for Bab's recovery as did Dr. Bedford. He got praise from all that country-side, and assured his flatterers that he had done very little for her. Modestly he spoke of nature and of nursing, but no one believed in these factors of cure—hardly any one, at least.

Gradually, little by little, Bab picked up the threads of full life. So gradually, so imperceptibly did she improve that there was no special time of thanksgiving, no actual period of recovery.

One by one her 'cannots' were turned into 'cans,' one by one she shed her infirmities, one by one her weaknesses left her, one by one she shook herself free from her ailments. Then the wheeled carriage was banished to the coach-house, and Bab sat up, and stood,

and moved across the room, gloating over the familiar scenes which had never looked the same focussed supinely.

There came a time when she could totter to and fro the terrace with an arm, and cut the roses for herself, and stoop to smell the tall lilies. There came a later time when that useful arm of her companion went round her waist, holding her more firmly than her infirmities required, while its owner talked Greek to her, as he had talked when the lilies were fresh planted that were now full grown.

But now she had a crib to the language and could translate freely.

'A wreck,' she said, 'a ruin—I'm not fit, Jack.'

Her nurse had turned into another character, his voice was soft enough, but he had dropped his suave, guarded, and measured method of speech.

'Am I not the best judge for what you are fit? You are getting so robust, Bab, you are getting so out of hand that I'm on tenterhooks for fear one fine morning you will be off without me. Off—off to Cornwall, Bab.'

She blushed, but looked him steadily in the face.

'I am damaged,' she said, 'I am tired now. I am not like other women.'

'No, you never were, Bab, there is no one exactly like you, if there had been I should have gone to her long ago, she might have been less obdurate. Not another turn, no, sit down here in the shade, you have done enough walking for to-day. Bab, I want you to have and to hold for better and for worse. I have wanted you for a decade, but now, I think, I am on the right track, I think I shall entrap you.'

'I am always ill, Jack,' she said. 'I shall be a log tied to your heel, I shall be entirely "for worse."'

'You are the salt and savour of my life,' he said, extravagantly. 'All I want to flavour it, Bab. For

better and for worse, the worst is over, it was that day when I took a peppered knee and a peppery temper to Woodbury.'

'The worst,' she murmured, tremulously, 'has been rather bad, Jack.'

'Bab, think about it again, think it out and then answer.'

'Think about which?'

She was changing colour and her lips were white, she took his muscular right hand in her delicate hands firmly, and touched it with her mouth, answering his face, for he did not speak.

'Do you like me at last, my darling?'

'Yes,' she was frank with her tongue, and now, at last, he could fully appreciate the candour with his heart as well as with his understanding. 'Yes, I do, of course I do.—No, I can't explain when I began to understand.—At the farm in the snow first—and later and now.' She had lifted her eyes to the hills, they shone and glowed like sunshine. 'Wait and see.'

'My darling, I have waited nearly a quarter of a century, my hair is going grey with waiting. Must I wait now?'

'Words are nothing, everybody can talk, they can say "I love you." I should like something more strong than words.'

'Words will do now, Bab. Say, "I will marry you, Jack," that will do.'

'But I love you well enough to say,' and she was actually crying as she said this, 'I won't marry you, I cannot, I am not fit for you.'

'Bab, pride is not come between us, that rock that wrecks so many boats?'

'It is not pride,' she broke off, she was evidently analyzing her motives and struck by the sageness of his argument.

She looked up at him for guidance as she had fallen into the habit of doing, but his advice was wordless, for his lips were closing hers and saying much that was not articulate, nor argumentative. Bab gave in then, she had had an idea from the first that she would do so ; of late Jack had had the better of her in most things.

Although Bab had taken a long while to sink to the level which she had once despised, although it had taken her a long while to find her master, yet now that she had done so she had accomplished it thoroughly. Her surrender was natural, willing, absolute.

In the midst of his protestations she did once murmur 'Alethea?' and look at her lord for his explanation ; if Bab was a little dull of understanding when Jack interpreted the episode of Alethea—her interlude—he assured her that Alethea had been astute, and had known what it all signified far better than he, himself, had known.

It had been a great impertinence on his part, of course, but Alethea had taken the proposition for what it was worth ; she was a charming, sensible person, and would be, next to Jack himself, more delighted than any one in the world over the prospect of the coming wedding.

And Bab believed him ; she lacked some feminine faculties even now.

No one was surprised : by this time every one knew that poor Jack Holland was bent on sacrificing his brilliant prospects to an invalidish woman, and no one was overmuch startled when he added to the proofs of his infatuation by marrying her.

After all, it was allowed his prospects had not been exceptionally promising, and Combe was a comfortable quarter in which to hang up a straw hat.

Lady Young was, truth to tell, fairly well pleased at

the news, though she was unpleasant enough to the chief actors concerning it. If Alethea was less pleased than her step-mother, she was far more pleasant, and she carried out Jack's expectation of warm congratulations and great interest in the event. She constituted herself Bab's defender at Woodbury, and tussled many a time valiantly in Mrs. Holland's defence without a pang of conscience,—a legitimate outlet for feelings was a luxury to her. Jack's wife and she were undemonstrative friends when they were together, but apart they were staunch supporters of each other, and much interested mutually one in the other, as women who have divided the favours of 'the one man in the world,' are sure to be.

The wedding was as quiet as a wedding can be, though it was legitimately ushered in with presents, notes, and a flutter of congratulations. The honeymoon was a health-seeking cruise in the Mediterranean, a useful honeymoon with an object, the sort of honeymoon which the bridegroom told the bride she could appreciate.

When her young lady had been, and could be, nothing but a pitiable topic of converse, a 'paw craytur,' Becket had avoided her neighbours. She was, as are the majority of humanity, unsociable in adversity, but now she descended with a piece of bride-cake in her hand and a new bonnet on her head to the lodge, and bragged to Mrs. Basten about the bride's powers, as though a pair of walking legs and a fairly strong back were unique possessions.

Jack had the same way of bragging about his wife's achievements, and his mother-in-law read aloud little pieces of the honeymoon letter to her husband, smiling faint, indulgent approval over that weakness of his—a weakness which had brought strength, strength of several diverse species, to their daughter.

Bab wrote, but short, telegraphic bits of news; the sort of letters which are written to fill a five-minutes'

wait, or to catch the post, letters characteristic of Bab. Her husband's name set somewhere in each short sentence was the only new phase in her communications, excepting of course the bold signature of Mary Holland, written large to fill the sheet.

'She never mentions her health,' said the master of the house, with exultation. 'He will bring her back well, Mary. She'll be out after the hounds again in the autumn. If that's to be so, let him keep her to himself now as long as he likes, though, heaven knows, the place is strange without her.'

But Captain Fenwick was destined to be disappointed ; when Bab reached a certain stage of improvement she stuck there and did not advance ; henceforward she was known to have more spirit than strength ; the out-of-door life of vigorous exertion which she loved was impossible to a delicate woman. She never rode again. That last drive of hers had broken her nerve, she would not touch the reins, but was not her husband at hand to drive her whither she would through the country-side ?

'Wait and see,' Bab had told Jack long ago when he had been clamouring to be assured of a pleasant fact ; he would not wait at that impatient moment, but he remembered what she had said when, as time went by, he 'watched and saw' what she had tried to tell him would be his.

Open-handed and generous she had always been, and now she was lavish with the sort of favours for which he had a capacious appetite ; she was happiest in her husband's company, she was not at her liveliest and best without him ; she liked him to make up her mind, she allowed him the upper hand, which it was his nature to appreciate, the whip-hand in all things domestic and otherwise. She even interested herself in serious matters, and was not disdainful when he entered vigorously into such county work as came into his energetic way.

Her enthusiasm for him was such that it appeared to awaken her reverence for the mistress of Woodbury, to whom she was attentive, gentle, kindly, and who, finding that she could do so with impunity, descended as a wolf on the Combe fold, taking every advantage of a mother-in-law's perquisites of interference, detraction, and candid speaking.

When Jack 'waited and saw' Bab listening to her mother-in-law's opinion concerning the Combe nursery, he wanted no more sight-seeing; he was satisfied; Bab was listening to advice about her son and heir, she was hearing of his puniness, of his weakness, and she was saying, amicably,

'Of course, I don't know anything about them myself, Lady Young, but my mother says he is a particularly sharp, strong, good-looking child.'

THE END.

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